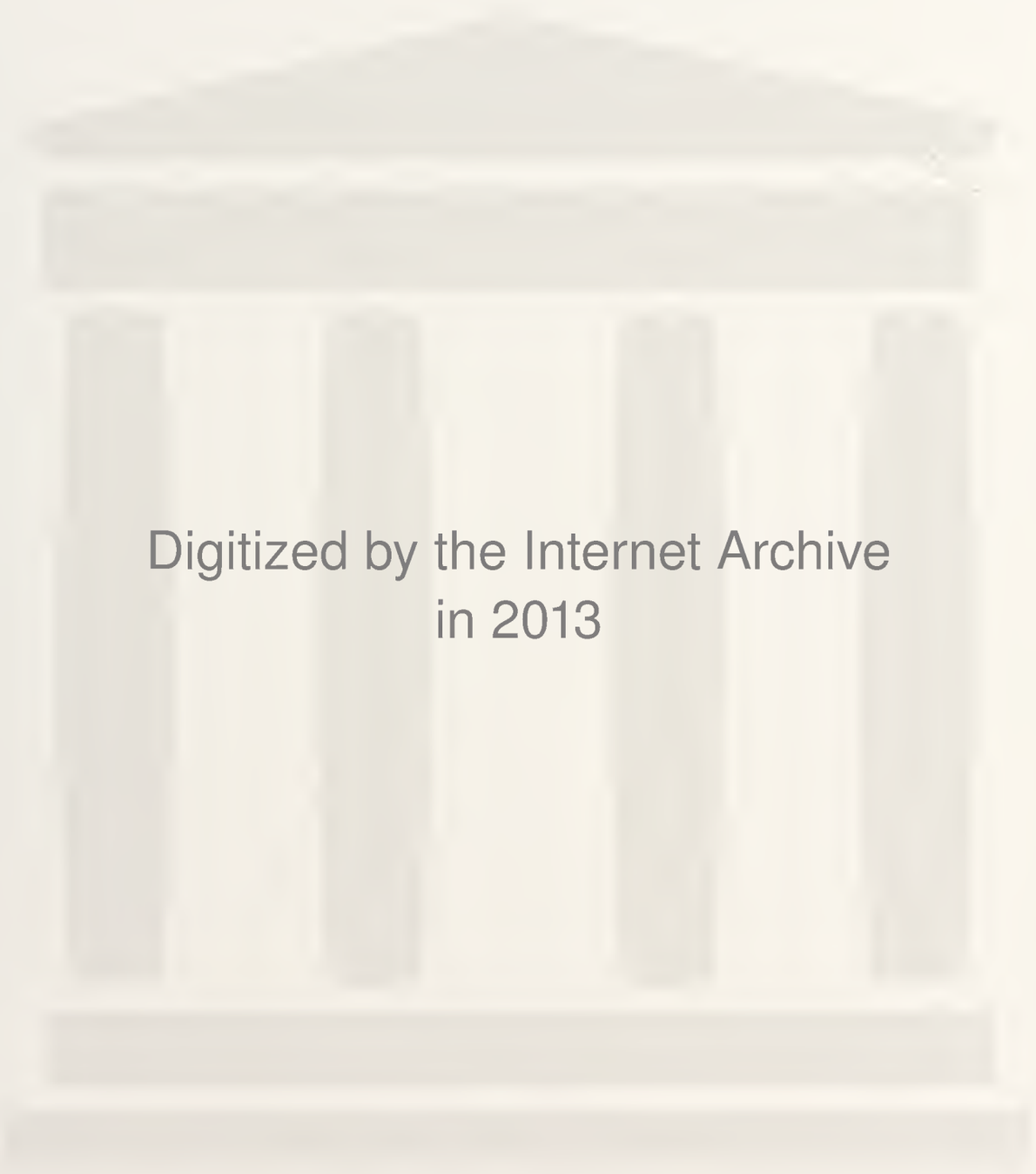
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EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thesis/Project

WE BREATHE, WE BLESS
Women-Church: Trodding Paths of Passion and Faith

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

2001

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Acknowledgments

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then
it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried;
children danced, women laughed, children cried until exhausted and riven,
all and each lay about the clearing damp and gasping for breath.
In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her big heart.

It has taken many years, more than I can count for this to have been accomplished. It has taken many big hearts that have contributed to my being able to do this. I am most grateful for the "big heart" of God and the Spirit of Holy Wisdom and Sacred Imagination that has stirred in me and directed my life journey.

I am grateful to my mother Estelle, for her support and encouragement in all my endeavors and her unconditional love, and to my father Andrew whose time in this life was too short.

I am most grateful to Dr. Kwok Pui Lan of Episcopal Divinity School for sharing her knowledge with me, for her mentoring, encouragement, support and confidence during these past four years. I am appreciative for her "trodding this path" with me. Thank you.

I am indebted to Dr. Lucretia B. Yaghjian for her support, encouragement and for keeping me faithful to the possibility. Heartfelt thanks for being a companion on the journey.

I am appreciative of all those who have instructed me at Episcopal Divinity School, especially Dr. Angela Bauer, Dr. Joanna Dewey, the Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward

and the Rev. Dr. Renee Hill. I thank my readers, the Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward and Dr. Gale Yee for their time and support in this endeavor.

I am grateful for the encouragement I have received from the Rev. Hope Eakins, Rector of St. John's Church, Essex, Connecticut, and to the parishioners of St. John's for their many prayers.

I am thankful for the support I have received from my student colleagues at EDS, the Rev. Dr. Nancy A. Vogele, the Rev. Dr. Debbie Little and Iona Smith Nze (for Spirit-filled eyes and hands).

I want to thank my friend and colleague, Dr. Maura A. Ryan of the University of Notre Dame for believing in me and challenging me along the way in my coming to know what I wanted to do.....THIS!

Thanks to the many friends who dared me to imagine things differently, Bill and Margie, Mary and Linda, the "Emster," Joan and Paul.

I am so grateful to my many students who filled me with a passion for teaching. I am honored by their allowing me to be a companion on many varied journeys.

In speaking of passion, I thank Dr. Thomas Groome of Boston College for encouraging me to go forward and having faith in my doing feminist theology.

My gratitude to the many women of Women-Church, who have trusted me, welcomed me and shared their stories of passion and faith with me. . . . Thank you, my sisters.

My gratitude to Marie Sheehan of Massachusetts Women-Church and to Francine Corcoran Edwards, colleague and good friend.

Words are not sufficient to express my appreciation and gratitude to my life friend and partner, who has run, walked and crawled with me in this journey. David, thank you for revealing a wonderful and special feature of God to me. . . . You!

It is with a grateful heart that I proclaim. . . . "There is a Sweet, Sweet Spirit."

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were blessed of the earth, its inheriting the meek or its glory bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (87-88)

Chapter titles throughout this thesis are adapted from *There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit*, by Doris Akers.

PROLOGUE

This thesis is written for the nonspecialist. I write this as an attempt to bridge the gap between the lecture hall and day-to-day experiences of women and men. It is also an effort to create a link between Roman Catholic women and men and feminist theologians.

Over the past two decades a wealth of writing has been published on the issue of the relationship of the Church and women. So much so, that to keep up with this proliferation of writing is difficult even for committed feminist theologians. From all corners of the world innumerable presses are continually rolling off studies and writings on spirituality, theology, anthropology, history and exegesis. In the profusion of all this wonderful written material, I fear that parishioners (women and men) are left behind. The day-to-day lives for the majority of people who sit in our church benches do not allow them the time nor the luxury to broaden their interests or to follow their curiosity regarding issues pertaining to women and the Church. I write this thesis with the hope that it is a step toward bridging the gap of both information and time.

It is with confidence that I would say that the primary resource for feminists as well as the Church is rooted in the lives of people and, for my purposes, in the lives of women. This resource is not found solely in books. I hope that this thesis will serve those who read it as both an "introduction" and an "invitation" to feminist theology in providing a sampling of insights from a range of feminist theologians that may offer encouragement for the readers to further investigate the works written by them. This thesis is also an invitation offered to those women and men who week after week worship

in their local churches only to walk out of these institutions frustrated, confused, angered, marginalized and searching for perhaps an alternative community of believers.

Feminism has many definitions. I want to clarify my own use of the term because I write this thesis from a feminist perspective. It is my understanding that feminism is a worldview with vastly different interpretations. Feminism is a perspective through which we are capable of seeing the world and its many interactions with societal structures and cultural and religious forums. Feminism stands in opposition to sexism as a worldview. Sexism constricts and restricts the identities and roles of women and men. Sexism is so entrenched in the structure of society and in the Church that it appears naturalized in its existence. Sexism as it is supported by religion may even be considered by some to be divinely ordained.

In contrast, feminism suggests a way of life that emphasizes partnership and mutuality rather than separateness, dominion and submission. Feminism promotes inclusivity rather than exclusivity. The conviction that the full development of creation can only occur within a community rooted in justice is integral to feminism.

I use the feminist perspective in this thesis as an attempt to provide an alternative and a fresh view of Church as exemplified in the movement of Women-Church. I will argue that Women-Church provides not only an alternative view for women in the Roman Catholic Church but is a potential model for wholeness for women and men as a community of believers.

I intend in this thesis to point women and men toward a new effort to be faithful to their beliefs and to value their own experiences and insights. I hope this thesis will direct the women and men who read this toward a new claiming of their own language

and voice in the Church. It is to these many women and men that I have listened. These are the people for whom I write.

This thesis is based, first, on personal lived experience. My strength and courage to state this comes from a comment made by feminist liberation theologian, the Rev. Dr. Renée Hill. She said, "A 'just' use of voice involves an insistence on subjectivity, especially for the marginalized self."[1] I am a white male. Socially and economically, I would position myself in the upper-middle class of a First World country. I have twenty-one years of formal education, which includes two graduate degrees. I am strongly aware that the combination of these characteristics—white, male, upper-middle class and advanced educational status—places me far from the margins and nearer to the center of power in present society. This position is very different from that of other white men and women, as well as people of other races and socio-economic positions in the United States.

Furthermore, like all human beings, I exist at a definable time and place in history. By birth I am a mid-westerner, born and raised in the southwest suburbs of Chicago in the state of Illinois. By relocation, I have been a resident of the state of Massachusetts for the past twenty-six years. I was born in 1954, a time of supposed stability for our country. Coming of age in the turbulence of the 60's and early 70's, I became involved in the anti-war movement (against the United States military action in Vietnam) and other liberal social and religious causes. It was during this period that I was first exposed to and engaged in the feminist liberation movement in both society and the Roman Catholic Church. I am a "cradle Catholic," having been baptized into the faith as

[1] Comment made and idea contributed in critique of original text of "Social Location" written for course entitled, "Feminist Theological Praxis: Contemporary Justice Issues," Spring 1998, Episcopal Divinity School.

an infant, with continued catechesis and faith development throughout the entirety of my parochial school years and living at home with my parents.

To many, I have lived a privileged life from a privileged position. Nevertheless, in addition to all these privileged characteristics, I am also a gay man. Because of this one particular fact about myself, both the Roman Catholic Church and society have felt justified in marginalizing me. For this very reason, being Christian and Roman Catholic are at times a particularly painful part of my identity. For the most part, Christian churches have sided with and have contributed to my experience of oppression, especially in their doctrines, teachings and perspectives regarding homosexuality. The Church, like society, operates with certain biases: patriarchy, hierarchy, heterosexism, racism and classism. For example, even though, in the process of coming to know and accept myself as a gay male, I have grown in my understanding of what it means to be a Christian, a Roman Catholic and a disciple of Jesus Christ. The Church has not only affirmed this truth but has simultaneously inhibited my ability to speak it. The Church refuses to acknowledge the fact that the gospel values of love, justice and liberation are core to my life and expressions of faith precisely because I am a gay male. While being a gay male may put the Church at odds with me, I myself do not feel it puts me at odds with the Church.

I remain a member of the Church because I am a gay male, not in spite of it. First, this personal history and experience of oppression has connected me to other minorities who share similar painful experiences in the Church. Second, my experience has also caused me to do my own personal theological reflection. In this process, I saw similarities between my personal theological views and those of women's theological reflections.

This led me to study further theologies constructed by feminist and liberation theologians.

Feminist liberation theologies teach women to affirm their own voices as legitimate. In doing so, these theologies have enabled women to value other marginalized voices as important. My particular voice as a gay male, therefore, is affirmed. Additionally, feminist liberation theologies have strengthened all voices by insisting, first and foremost, that women's voices along with other marginalized voices are not only legitimate, not only crucial, but privileged precisely because of their being delegitimized by the patriarchal power structures of the Church and society.

Feminist liberation theologies have taught me that any theology that is rooted in life will always generate new questions. Our theologies must arise from and contribute to history. This principle is true of feminist liberation theologies, since both feminism and liberation are, after all, historical events. In stressing this, feminist liberation theologies are set against much that is traditional in Christian theology. Therefore, it is essential that in liberating both ourselves and liturgical practices from patriarchy, hierarchy, heterosexism, racism and misogyny, we do not do so at the expense of others. I would suggest that we who are involved in advancing and furthering these theologies remain committed to the liberation of others. This, in itself, insists then that we be involved in other feminist theologies such as: mujerista, womanist and noncaucasian theologies, African American theologies, Asian American theologies, Latin American theologies, Native American theologies and Gay/Lesbian theologies. It is important that we learn from and challenge one another's theological insights.

I have chosen to focus this thesis on the Women-Church movement in the United States as one concrete example of feminist liberation theologies' ability to incarnate a new model for Church, one that takes into account the blessedness and value of all God's creation. Aware that my marginalization is not the same as women's in the Roman Catholic Church, I still feel that my voice can join with theirs to challenge the status quo of the Roman Catholic Church and construct this new vision. Women in the Church and I as a gay man have privileged perspectives that enable us to challenge the Church and offer a new vision, so too, as a man committed to feminist liberation theology I can offer challenge and support to women involved in the Women-Church movement. It is from this perspective that I write this thesis. I hope that what I have begun here will have some meaning for the many sisters and brothers who are companions on this journey.

Through this story I hope Caucasian women, African American women, Asian women, Latina women, women of the First, Second and Third worlds, lesbian women, transgendered women, straight women, Christian and non-Christian women, as well as men and children may continue to be inspired to be companions for one another on their particular journeys in seeking liberation, equality and justice.

1

"And for These Blessings"

INTRODUCTION

Defining the Problem

That women are active in the Church should come as no surprise. The Church is called to follow the Risen Lord in his mission of reconciling love for the world. By preaching and healing, it invites women and men everywhere to form a community of love, solidarity and service, of reconciliation and wholeness, where the many gifts of the one Spirit are made manifest in the shared ministry of all the baptized. Since the Second Vatican Council, a new vision of church and a movement of women in the Church called Women-Church, as just such a community, have begun to take shape. In this thesis I refer to this movement as Women-Church. This movement is a phenomenon that has grown and spread through the Roman Catholic Church in the past thirty years. Some may prefer to say that Women-Church is an "organization." However, to best represent the growth, development and mobility of Women-Church, I will refer to it as a movement throughout this thesis.

One woman in the Women-Church movement says, "The move from, 'Please let us in,' and, 'Please, sir, may I have more?' to 'We are the Church' has strengthened

women's spiritual, liturgical and ecclesial self-determination and agency. When women do not find what they want in a parish church, they create what they want, weary of beating their heads against the curial wall."[1]

It is clear that the emerging vision of a church of co-responsibility and collegiality, mutuality and equality in the spirit, challenges us to develop new models of ministry that are collaborative, enabling and creatively accountable to the whole community. Women-Church is one model that continues to be challenged as it strives to be and promote such a vision of Church.

To realize this potential, however, many obstacles have to be confronted that inhibit the growth of the church as a community of discipleship. Among these obstacles are the disjunction between the message of the gospel and the behavior of the clergy with respect to the experiences of women and lay men in the Church that make them feel less than fully human, unwelcome, unacknowledged, demeaned and unable to pray in the style and with the passion they desire.

Therefore, the most serious underlying obstacle that needs to be faced today is clericalism. As Women-Church addresses this obstacle, a platform is provided to further critique other "isms" inherent in clericalism, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. To define more clearly this "obstacle," one may simply say that clericalism promotes the particular interests of the male clergy and protects the privileges and powers that have traditionally been conceded to those in the clerical state. There are attitudinal, behavioral and institutional dimensions to the phenomenon of clericalism. It is important to be aware that persons other than clerics can exhibit traits of clericalism. All people are liable to the pitfalls of clericalism in certain situations.

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[1] Francine Corcoran Edwards, conversation with author, October 1998.

Generally speaking, exclusive, elitist or dominating behavior can be exhibited by any person or group within the Church. Such behavior, while not technically termed clericalism, still rests its claim on a special religious expertise or ecclesiastical authority based on role or status in the church. The basic meaning of clericalism predominantly pertains to ordained priests and ministers who can appeal to the structures and expectations of office in the church to justify inappropriate attitudes and behaviors that are ultimately counterproductive to the Church's life and mission. This is why Women-Church and feminist theologies continue to critique clericalism in their effort to envision a liberated community of faith, coherent with the gospel message.

Clericalism as a practice is to be distinguished from ordained ministry and priesthood as such. It is neither identical with or a necessary consequence of priesthood, but a diminishment and distortion of it, as viewed through a feminist theological lens. Clericalism is not an exclusively Roman Catholic phenomenon: it can be observed in nearly all churches, at all levels of ministerial leadership. Whenever and however it manifests itself, clericalism impoverishes Christian witness to the gospel. Simply stated, clericalism justifies those who are "in" to designate those who are "out."

Definition of Women-Church

There are many definitions for Women-Church. These definitions come from many different perspectives and are provided by various feminists and feminist theologians. As a male who has participated in Women-Church, I like one suggested by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who defines Women-Church as " a feminist movement of self-identified women and women-identified men [which] transcends all traditional man-

made denominations."[2] I find this definition useful because it says there is a place for me in Women-Church, as well as room for others.

Because of the many concrete ways in which Women-Church have been lived out in the past twenty-five or more years, it is not possible to define it in one particular way. The various Women-Church groups, however, do share common characteristics: a particular place as a movement in the history of the Church, women using their own voices in doing their own theologizing, the development of liturgies and rituals by women to express this theological reflection and the reclaiming of ministerial roles and functions for all the people of God.

Women from every walk of life are involved in Women-Church groups across the country. Women of varied professions, backgrounds, ethnic groups and economic brackets join Women-Church for a multiple of reasons. Yet there are characteristics that are common to the movement of Women-Church. First is the lived history, stories, and gatherings of small groups as well as conferences of large numbers of women in the past twenty-five years. From the first gathering of women in Detroit calling for the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church to the gathering of men and women in Oakland twenty years later to celebrate a "Critical Mass" (a Eucharistic celebration presided over by non-ordained women), we see evidence of the continued shaping of history by Women-Church. Significant to this history, and of great value to Women-Church, is the consciousness of a whole group of women and men no longer simply being preached to as recipients of a message, but of a group with a variety of ideas to contribute.

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[2] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 7-8.

In addition to sharing a history, Women-Church shares a commitment to continue doing their own theologizing, including the development of alternative Christologies and Spiritualities.The listening of women to their own voices and experiences as authoritative for theological reflection contributes greatly to these developments. Christologies that reflect women's images of Christ/Jesus, their relationship to this Christ/Jesus and Christ/Jesus' relationship to women is useful not only for women but for others also. Women's experience gives fruitfulness to the creation of spiritualities which affirm that these experiences are important and valid for understanding and interpreting God's revelation.

The creation and celebration of new liturgies and rituals come out of this theologizing and reflection as an affirmation of this shared history. Feminist liturgies and rituals bring to public expression the faith of Women-Church groups. Women-Church is a feminist liturgical community. The creation of new ways to celebrate liturgy is liberating from old symbols and rituals that are oppressive to women and to many other people.

Women-Church as a movement focuses on the reclaiming of ministerial roles for women. Thus, Women-Church may be defined as an agent of transformation. Women-Church has also made claim to a more inclusive history of the early Christian movement. The most valuable resource of the Church is its people. The taking care of these people, through healing, celebrating and proclaiming God's Word has for centuries been called the practice of ministry. Ministry in the early Church movement began as a multifaceted response to the growing needs of the Christian community. God's Spirit was alive in the community and gave individuals in the community different gifts. Communities in

different geographic locations and of different cultures had a variety of needs. Ministry was experienced in the community as gifts linked to the needs of the specific community. Ministry began as a mutual sharing of the gifts of the Spirit. These gifts are given to all members of the community, women and men. In doing its theologizing, Women-Church has claimed the presence of the Spirit in its midst. Women-Church has named the work it is doing as ministry. Women are able to affirm each other in their ministries and to describe their roles in ministry. The whole of ministry is not summed up in the question of the ordination of women. However, the exclusion of women from ordination brings about many questions integral to the word and sacrament of the Church. These questions and so much more can be summed up in the question of justice. Justice, liberation and equality for all of God's people is the vision of Women-Church.

A primary and fundamental characteristic central to all Women-Church groups is the denunciation of all forms of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a system of ecclesiastical and social structuring based on the supposed inferiority of selected groups characterized by sex, race and other qualifiers. Viewed from both a personal and Christian perspective, patriarchy is an unjust and destructive system that is dehumanizing. Any Christian or ecclesiastical structure which affirms anything less than the full humanity of women or others can be identified as sinful and should be denounced.

While much of the historical rooting of Women-Church can be shared with and is similar to the formation and development of other women's groups and their movements, there is much that is distinct, about the identity of Women-Church. That Women-Church is Roman Catholic in its tradition is unique to its character in identifying it as a women's movement among others. That the majority of the women involved in Women-Church

share a Roman Catholic background and experiences of Roman Catholic tradition, the prayer life, sacramentality and spirituality of Women-Church has roots in this context.

If one looks closely, it is noticeable that the achievement of the full humanity of all is not ranked as the primary goal of other world institutions or organizations, either. Women-Church is further making the point that only women can define the dimensions of their own humanity. From a Christian perspective, this is possible through dialogue within the Church. If we ask the question, What is at stake? The answer, in its most basic form, is the affirmation of the humanity of women.

Arguments for Thesis

In this thesis, I will show that Women-Church has a strategic contribution to make in the contemporary Roman Catholic Church. Given the problem of entrenched patriarchy in the Church, Women-Church as a movement, perhaps provisional, certainly imperfect, manifests a fuller understanding of the Reign of God.

First, Women-Church has great potential to be an agent of transformation for the Church. By breaking down the oppressive barriers that keep people out of the Church, Women-Church's seeking an inclusive history for the Church allows all people in. This transformation is needed in order for the Church to return to being the Church that embraces all people and creation.

Second, I suggest that it is a fact that the male hierarchy (primarily clerics) and women in the church are involved in an ongoing struggle for power. Women-Church and most women in Roman Catholic congregations overall are attempting to redefine power in all its aspects.

Lastly, as Women-Church continues to develop at the national, regional and local levels, I propose that Women-Church can make a significant difference in how people go about being Church. Also, Women-Church offers a compelling alternative vision for a transformed Church and Women-Church makes the attempt to practice what it preaches.

I choose these as my arguments for this thesis because the answers are important to me. I strive to bring about the Reign of God, through my work for justice, liberation and equality. This effort is at the core of my discipleship as a follower of Jesus and my ministry in the Church. I have faith and belief in the vision and hopes of Women-Church. You may wonder and ask why. Very simply stated, whether Women-Church realizes it or not, it has made room for me, as a white male. In doing this, Women-Church has opened the doors for all the people of God. What remains as significantly important to me is whether together we can all walk the talk, and not resort back to the kind of church we have chosen to transform. If this is the potential, I also argue that the Women-Church movement is not only crucial to all people, but even to all of God's creation.

Sources and Method

As mentioned in the Prologue, the foundation for this thesis is rooted in my lived experience. Factors contributing to this lived experience are my having been a teacher and campus minister in an all-girls' Catholic high school, as well as a pastoral minister in a parish church setting. Twenty-five years of my life have been lived in doing lay ministry for the Church. In addition to personal experience, an extensive review of literature was crucial to the development of my thesis. Additionally, my academic work and course of study for both a Masters in Pastoral Theology and a Doctor of Ministry

degree have significantly contributed to my understanding, inquiry and vision of Women-Church.

The core of this thesis rests on my many conversations with women who belong to various Women-Church communities. One member of the small local group that contributed to this thesis, Francine Corcoran Edwards, graciously agreed to interviews that took place numerous times during the course of the past four years. In respecting the requests of anonymity by the women who have contributed their voices to this thesis, their names are not used. The reasons for women's wanting to be anonymous vary. Many of the women involved in the small local Women-Church group and Massachusetts Women-Church group are employees of the Roman Catholic Church and are concerned about potentially losing their jobs. Other women simply preferred at the time not to be identified for personal reasons. Ultimately, it is an important contribution to this thesis that the voices of these women be heard and contained here.

Surveys were distributed to members of the suburban local Women-Church group. These surveys were used to gather information pertaining to various Christological perspectives that members of this group may have. Conversations, interviews and responses from this survey investigating women's images of God, spirituality and Christology can be found in Appendix II.

Feminist liberation theology, its praxis and method were crucial in the research and writing of this thesis. Liberation theology and feminist theology share similarities that are basic to both. Both of these theologies strongly influence my own theologizing and significantly color the theology put forth in this thesis.

Chapter Outline

My interest in Women-Church is to examine the formation and motivation of Women-Church, its perspective on ecclesiastical identity, its use of language, its vision and its hopes for the future. It is my impression thus far that a relationship of friendship and a genuine, voluntary, non-hierarchical embrace of one another is at the core of most Women-Church communities. Friends gather as community, friends bring other friends and friends of one person become friends of another.

Chapter 2 will look at the need for alternative communities and the roles of women in the early egalitarian Christian communities. This chapter will discuss what can be learned from these communities that is a useful model for Women-Church. The chapter will also address the meaning of Ekklesia. Lastly, the chapter will look at Women-Church as a spiritual community.

In Chapter 3, I will provide a brief history of the formation of the Women-Church movement in the United States, and I will look at this movement at national, regional and local levels. The demographics, origins and development of a local Women-Church group in suburban Boston are provided in this chapter. This chapter will also address the challenges, struggles, similarities and differences encountered by these Women-Church groups. Issues of power, authority and leadership are also addressed. It will conclude with a personal account of attending and participating in a Women-Church liturgy.

Chapter 4 will look at specific characteristics particular to Women-Church and present a vision for the future. Issues discussed in this chapter will be inclusivity, the concepts of mutuality and partnership in light of a new vision for ministry, the need for

alternative Christologies and the use of creative imagination in feminist spirituality and feminist liturgy.

The Epilogue will contain my concluding remarks and articulate what I have learned.

Appendix I includes samples of feminist liturgies, and prayers. Appendix II is the compilation of responses to the survey distributed to the local Women-Church group. The bibliography is followed by a list of suggested further readings related to issues and topics described in this thesis.

Conclusion

The present period is a time of transition and uncertainty. Women and men are caught in the ambiguity created by two sets of claims. One claim is the power of tradition to structure expectations and vision. The other is the community-building potential of a theoretically attractive but sociologically unrealized vision of Church. How Christians respond to these conflicting claims will determine the shape of the Church and its ministries. Women-Church, like many others, is pulled by these two claims. Some groups view this tension as a "both/and" resolve, while others perceive it as an "either/or."

From a feminist theological perspective I can only ask, How shall we address the problems of clericalism in ways that will help form a more inclusive community of solidarity and service, not only for a First-World Church, but at a global level? I think a very important factor of this has to do with the manner of approaching the question itself. There is a danger of a "we-they" polarization that leads only to mutual recrimination and refusal of responsibility. Approaching this question in this way would be simply counter-

productive. The alternative involves a search for common ground and the recognition of a common problem. This choice, however, requires in the first place the recognition that for the discussion to be fruitful, it must include voices from those on the margins of the Church. The potential for this to happen rests in the development of faith communities like that of Women-Church, because as the movements grow, so too will their voices. Consequently, the Church might just begin to hear their voices and their challenges as legitimate. Clarity about the complex factors that contribute to the problem of clericalism is another requirement of this choice. Equally important is the mutual willingness to accept responsibility and accountability, and to look for new forms and expressions of our solidarity in Christ for the sake of the Church's mission. These fundamental choices pertain to all who would enter the discussion.

Women-Church is real, and the transformation it seeks has begun. Whereas Women-Church may not have existed in the Early Church as it is today, elements of the early faith communities have been an invaluable resource for women in the creation of Women-Church communities, in their attempt to reshape and transform the Church to be again inclusive of all in the Reign of God.

2

"Now You Are Weak and Cannot Come In"

WOMEN-CHURCH: THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITIES

The Church cannot profess dignity, reverence and equality for all persons and continue to systematically exclude women as persons from fully participating in the institutionalized Church.[3]

The impact of this statement goes far beyond the level of women's participation in the Church. In addressing Pope John Paul II at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., during his first visit to the United States, Sister Theresa Anne Kane's voice powerfully challenges the institutionalized Church. Her singular voice speaks collectively for many of the Church's members. While Sr. Kane speaks directly for women, she is also representative of many disenfranchised and marginalized members of the Church. The institutionalized Church is called to look inwardly at itself and view the ongoing injustice that exists unopposed towards a large population of its members. This sentiment is not aligned to just what women are able to do or how they may participate in the Church. Sr. Kane's statement speaks boldly to the scope of the perception held by the

[3] Sister Theresa Anne Kane, R.S.M., taken from her 1979 greeting and address to Pope John Paul II in Washington, D.C. Quoted in Daniel Taylor-Stypa, *The Development of an Inclusive Spirituality: Some Suggestions for Educating Towards Its Reality* (Master's thesis, Boston College, 1990), 1.

Church. The Church's perception not only says something about how it perceives the physical nature of women, but it also chafes at the intellectual, spiritual and sacramental experiences of female members of the Church. The denial of women's experience and discernment of call is a continual struggle in women's attempts to be faithful to the Church.

The Church cannot witness or give sight to true justice and liberation in the world until it makes a serious and truthful examination of its attitudes and practices towards women. The challenges which continue to confront women in the Church today are the systemic evils of sexism, clericalism, heterosexism, racism and classism. These are dominant forces that have contributed to the distortion of the Church's history. In attempting to reclaim, recover and proclaim this story, women often experience these realities that serve as their impetus to depart from the Church as it is. Rosemary Radford Ruether comments, "It is precisely when feminists discover the congruence between the Gospel and liberation from sexism that they also experience their greatest alienation from existing churches."[4]

In this chapter, I will look at some specific areas that have contributed to the argument for the development of Women-Church as it is today. I will glance briefly at reasons for women's creation of their own intentional faith communities. Next, I will look at what women have recovered and reclaimed for themselves from an early Christian tradition that focused on an eschatological vision and prophetic discernment as its criteria for authority and leadership in early Christian communities. I will then give examples of how women in this early Christian movement resisted the institutionalization of patriarchy in the Church. Following will be a look at the early Church's counter-

[4] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 193.

resistance to this movement by women in its creation of a strong system of clericalism and acceptance of misogynistic attitudes and tendencies. Lastly, this chapter will address briefly some aspects of the spirituality of Women-Church. A spirituality that is Spirit-filled, Spirit-driven and is a motivating and transformational presence for Women-Church today. The spirituality of Women-Church will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Much of the content of this chapter relies on the scholarly work of feminist theologians Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Both of these women as feminist theologians have pioneered the phenomenon of Women-Church. The pioneering efforts of both Schüssler Fiorenza and Ruether as Christian feminist theologians has contributed significantly to the work of contemporary feminist theologians, the foundation of Women-Church and to the groundwork for this thesis.

Schüssler Fiorenza through her scholarly work of the New Testament has brought to contemporary women the consciousness of women who have played a significant role in the origins of Christianity. She has also contributed a hermeneutic of seeing old texts in new and fruitful ways, along with a hopeful cause for the future of the Church for women and men alike.

Ruether has provided for women in her vision and prototype of Women-Church a systematic critique of Christian theology from a feminist viewpoint. She has also supported the vision of Women-Church through a nonsexist understanding of Christianity and has paved a way to a fuller vision of humanity and faith. Ruether's work provides for an unusual integration of the political and the anthropological, sociological and the spiritual, and the personal and the intellectual.

In my own research for this thesis I have become ever more greatly aware of the vast numbers of women who, in coming to a heightened awareness of their own capabilities, experience their voices as mute in the patriarchal hierarchy, and their baptism as no guarantee of full engagement of their talents within the Church. These serve as a few of the reasons why many women have chosen to cease participating in the formal practices of the Roman Catholic faith. For many women, the fact that they are no longer present, coupled with their absence going unnoticed by ecclesiastical authorities, underscores their sense of being of little value to the Church.

As women own their own spiritual authority, they are making poignantly clear the reality of the institutional Church as being neither balanced nor congruent with Jesus' preaching or values as witnessed to in his life. The institutional Church at present is most concerned with maintaining the status quo and having "dominion over" as its *opus operandi* rather than lifting up and empowering those who are the "lowly" in society and within the Church itself.

So where do these women of the Church go? Where do they seek refuge and community? Where do they locate themselves as followers of Jesus? Many of these women who have experienced inhospitality in the Church choose to participate in churches where they feel welcome. Others have felt so badly treated in the name of Jesus and the "official" Church that they have left Christianity altogether. An example of this actual departure from Christianity is that of feminist philosopher Mary Daly, who preached an "exodus sermon"[5] at Harvard Memorial Chapel in November of 1971 in which she invited others to follow her out of the Church. Daly's perception of

[5] Mary Daly, "The Women's Movement: An Exodus Community," *Religious Education* 67, no. 5 (1972): 333.

Christianity is that it is irredeemable for women. She has repeatedly called for an exodus of women from Christianity.

Through my working with women in the Church, having been a teacher and campus minister for adolescent multi-cultural women in a Roman Catholic secondary school, and in my ordinary day to day conversations with women, I hear a common voice saying that the alternatives are minimal; "endure the pain or find a new home."[6] For many who have experienced inhospitality in Roman Catholic parishes, an exodus to churches that are welcoming such as intentional base-communities and other Protestant churches has been a solution. In the past two decades there has been a growing number of informal small group gatherings of women that have been meeting throughout the world as intentional faith communities. These numerous small groups of women are on a journey of discovery. My experience with several of these small groups informs me that for many, there is a feeling of finally being at home. These small intentional faith groups of women make up the community better known as Women-Church. Women-Church as self-defined by its members may be described as:

> Community without hierarchy, we sit in a circle. Community without sexism, we experience each other as image of God, and God as Mother, Breath, Ruah, Shekinah. Community without rigidity, we may all participate in shaping the celebration to reflect our own journeys and how God is a part of them. Community without slavery to fixed

[6] This is the collaborative voice of women with whom I have spoken with in recent and past years. This is an example of pastoral advice given or the lack thereof. I am struck by this sentiment having been expressed by many high school–age women I ministered to as their Campus Minister, in their early experience of feeling unwelcome in the Church of their baptism.

> space, we can rediscover our bodies in gesture and dance, free-flowing movement. Community without judgment, we may as women, finally offer our best gifts without fear that they will be refused because of our gender.[7]

The rediscovery and recovery of the rich tradition of women's roles, leadership and spirituality in the Church is one of the many contributions of the phenomenon of Women-Church. To further the process of this thesis it is necessary to examine some of this tradition that has contributed so significantly to formation of the early Christian church and contrasts to the existing Church. To reestablish and reaffirm this feminine/feminist spirituality it is necessary to draw from the roots of "Her-story" in history. It is unfortunate that even with the many splendid women and their stories that have contributed to shaping a spirituality of women, in the institutional Church, women's spirituality has been perceived by male hierarchy as a very small part of a usable past. This history is limited by distortions in its telling and writing, and in its focus on a Western European and [colonial] religious experience. In briefly looking to the past, it is possible to formulate a framework for the present.

Lessons from the Early Christian Community

> *The history of theology makes it abundantly clear that each age has its own contributions to make to the understanding of the life of faith. These are conditioned by a variety of cultural and historical circumstances. In one age with its peculiar questions provoked by a special religious experience and understanding of reality, some*

[7] Sheila Durkin Dierks, *WomenEucharist* (Boulder, Colo.: Woven Word Press, 1997), 16.

> *aspects of the theology of sacraments may be highlighted while others, which received attention previously are neglected. A new age, stimulated by its own religious needs may rediscover these forgotten aspects and contribute to the overall intelligibility by building on earlier knowledge.*[8]

Feminist spirituality has not evolved out of recent feminist theories and frameworks. Various frameworks and hueristic concepts as androcentrism, women, patriarchy and femininity all are useful instruments that assist in the reconstruction of women's roles in history. Schüssler Fiorenza's use of a feminist biblical and historical hermeneutic has recovered women's roles and leadership in early Christian history. While this reconstruction creates some problems due to feminism having arisen out of various theoretical perspectives, Schüssler Fiorenza's framework returns the historical agency of women to the history of early Christianity. She says:

> It is important to explore heuristic interpretive usefulness in reconstructing women's history in early Christianity. . . . such a reconstruction has its goal not only to restore women to history and history to women but also to transform and re-conceptualize early history.[9]

Through this feminist biblical hermeneutical framework, women are able to make claim to their own theology and history. Important to the early Christian community at this time was the eschatological vision that influenced their way of living, practices and

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[8] Edward J. Kilmartin, "Theology of the Sacraments: Toward a New Understanding of the Chief Rites of The Church of Jesus Christ," in *Alternative Futures for Worship*, Vol. No. 1, ed. Regis A. Duffy, O.F.M. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1987), 124-25.

[9] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1983), 4.

social structuring. This vision was deeply rooted in a sense of liberation, equality and inclusiveness. Paul's eschatological vision of equality in Christ is dualistic, yet in part contributes to maintaining women's active role in the early communities of the Church. Ruether offers this explanation:

> Paul understands women's new equality in Christ "eschatologically." He sees it as a part of the new transcendent order that has begun in the redeemed community, the Church. His view of slavery is very similar. Women and slaves have a foretaste of this eschatological liberation of all creation within the Christian community. This is expressed for Paul, not merely 'spiritually', but in the ability of women and slaves to exercise leadership roles to teach, prophesy and spread the good news.[10]

Several tensions existed within early Church communities. These tensions were experienced both internally as well as externally by members of the community. The tension within the early Church was of several natures. One tension was in the manner in which the Christian communities were structured. These communities were structured in ways that were different ideologically compared with the other societal communities at the time. The Christian communities were considered to exist "outside" the local community because of their practices and egalitarian structure. So, while Christian communities were a part of the larger societal community, they were also separated from it. Another tension existed internally as the Church developed its own organizational structure. This contributed to the strengthening of the patriarchal and hierarchical

[10] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Patristic Spirituality and the Experiences of Women in the Early Church," in *Western Spirituality: Historical Roots, Ecumenical Roots*, ed. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1981), 142.

structuring that develops within the Church. Another contributing factor to this development was the acceptance of the patriarchal family as normative in the early Church. A definite tension arises between the concept of church as the messianic movement and the normative family. Ruether elaborates on these tensions and contradictions in describing how the early Church shaped its response to women:

> A belief in the beginnings of a new eschatological order in the Church that overcomes the hierarchy of male over female, and, on the other hand the ideal that the hierarchy of the male over female is the order of nature and is to be affirmed as the normative social order of the world shaped the response of the early Church to the question of women. There is evidence that this was a question in the early centuries of the Church.[11]

Women were leading individuals in the early Christian movement. They were accepted as full members of the movement's communities, having both the authority and power of the Gospel. Ruether points out that women's roles and functions in the early Christian movement were the same as men's because all members of the community shared equality in Christ. This equality in the early church communities gives evidence of a prevailing inclusive Christology, for which she provides the following examples:

> The story of Mary and Martha is an early Christian affirmation of the right of women, equally with men to sit at the feet of the Christian teacher (Luke 10:38-42). Paul shows us that women functioned in his churches as local Church leaders and traveling evangelists (Phil.4:2-3, Rom.16:3). The Books of Acts declares that the Pentecostal Spirit is

[11] Ruether, *Patristic Spirituality,* 144.

> poured on God's maidservants and menservants alike (Acts 2:17). Prophecy, an essential element in early Christian leadership was exercised by women as well (Acts 21: 9).[12]

Authority and leadership in the early Christian Church were attributed to individuals having the gift of prophesy. Women had a very active role in the prophetic community of the early Church. Evidence of this in found in the Book of Revelation and also in the Didache. The Didache is a document which is believed to have been written towards the end of the first century (Common Era) in Syria, describing the functioning and ways of early Christian communities. The Didache gives witness to prophets and the gift of prophecy as having continued authority in the Church communities. The Didache suggests that the normative leadership of the early Church was held by those accepted as prophets within the Church's community. There were no specifications as to the gift of prophecy being given only to the men of the community; the Gifts of the Spirit were given to both women and men in the faith community. That the gift of prophecy was held in such high regard gives us further evidence of the participatory roles of women in the ministry of the early Church. Schüssler Fiorenza explains this in saying:

> The Didache esteems the prophets highly. It instructs Christians to give them a share of all their possessions, because prophets have the same roles and rights of the Jewish high priests. The Fourth Gospel asserts that the Paraclete was sent to all disciples and its community understanding was therefore prophetic. It is thus no accident that the

[12] Ruether, *Patristic Spirituality,* 144.

> Fourth Gospel contains very powerful stories about women disciples like, Martha, Mary and Mary of Magdela.[13]

The institutionalization of the Church contributes to the strengthening of patriarchy in the Church. This contributes to the diminishment of women's roles in the early Christian communities of the Church. The richness of women's roles, ministry and leadership is fragmented by early Christian male writers. Women are never fully credited for what gifts they bestowed to the tradition of the Church.

This patriarchal institutionalization and the hierarchical structure of the Christian church further marginalizes women within the Church's structure. This does not, however, lessen the extent to which women did function or the validity of women's leadership in the early Church communities. Schüssler Fiorenza attributes this strengthening of patriarchy in the Church to political reasons. She explains:

> While androcentric transmission and redaction of early Christian traditions can be attributed partially to an early Christian cultural political apologetics, the canonization of early Church writings took place at a time when different parts of the Church were engaged in a bitter struggle for or against women's leadership. This struggle was engendered by the gradual patriarchalization of early churches.[14]

Many communities of Christians attempted to maintain the vision of the early Church communities described in the Didache. Those who maintained this as the "way" created new and alternative intentional Christian faith communities. These groups (Montanists and other Gnostic groups for example) attempted to demonstrate that the

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[13] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 298.
[14] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 53.

"Spirit" and teachings of their communities were in apostolic community with the first followers of Jesus. Schüssler Fiorenza says:

> Both parties, the opponents as well as the advocates of the ecclesial leadership of women, claim apostolic succession for such leadership. The advocates point to Mary Magdelene, Salome or Martha as apostolic disciples. They stress apostolic succession of prophetesses in the Old and New Testament and call attention the women of apostolic times mentioned in Romans 16.[15]

The patriarchalization of the Church had to overcome various early Christian theologies and praxis that legitimized women's leadership and roles of authority. To equate women, their leadership, authority and roles with heresy gave weight to the diminishment of their place in Church ecclesial structure and Church theology.

Some women were able to work within the patriarchal system of the Church, attempting to maintain its early Christian patterns. Other women challenged the misuse of power. Still other women resourced the tradition and did as some women before them and began counter-religious communities. These small intentional faith communities attempted to live at their best the Gospel values. These groups gave genesis to the early desert hermits and later monastic groups. Not all groups became religious communities as such. Some remained communities of laity that followed women, such as Paula of Rome.

As mentioned previously, intentional faith communities developed to counteract the patriarchalization of the Church. One of these groups was the Montanists. The Montanists were one of several gnostic groups which attempted to present their group and teachings as being in apostolic continuity with Jesus and the first disciples. The

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[15] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 53.

followers of Montanus are called "Montanists." Montanism, a schismatic movement originated in Phryagia about the middle of the second century and had almost completely disappeared by the end of the sixth century. Montanists viewed themselves as a spiritual elite called to restore the Church to its primitive simplicity as directly guided by the Holy Spirit. Several women in the Montanist communities are known to have held roles of leadership and authority. Two prominent women of the Montanist movement were Priscilla and Maximilla. Schüssler Fiorenza illustrates their positions in the community, describing them as follows:

> Maximilla and Priscilla (Prisca) were the leading prophets in Montanism. They were not just companions of Montanus, but had equal spiritual gifts and leadership in the Montanist movement. Like Montanus, the women prophets claimed that the Paraclete or Holy Spirit spoke directly to that through them. This claim was based on faith in the revelations given by the Holy Spirit to women and men in prophetic ecstasy.[16]

Further indications are given of the many roles and ministerial functions held by women in the Montanist community. This leadership by women within these intentional faith communities of the Montanists provoked the attacks evidenced in Anti-Monatanist literature. Schüssler Fiorenza further describes the ministerial roles held by women in the Montanist communities. She explains:

> Since Priscilla and Maximilla were proof that the Holy Spirit spoke through the female sex, the Montanists admitted women to Church "offices." Didymus maintains that women prophets in Montanism

[16] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 301.

> taught and prophesied in the assembly of the community. Firmilian knows of a prophetess in Asia Minor who in 235 C.E. converted many lay-people and clerics. She baptized and celebrated the Eucharist. (Cypr. Ep.75.10).[17]

Emphasis on the "Gifts of the Spirit" paved a path for the practice of an egalitarian form of leadership in various early Church communities. Discernment by the community and evidence of the gift of prophesy, not gender, were attributes for leadership in the community.

Women contributed significantly to the development of monastic communities in the Church. Women held leadership roles in house churches of this period. Examples can be found in the New Testament: a house church in Phillipi was founded by Lydia, a business woman from Thyatira (Acts16:14f); the house church in Colossae was under the leadership of Philemon, Archippus and Aphhis (Philemon 2); and the church in the house of Nympha of Laodicea is referred to by the author of Colossians (Col.4:15).

Women as patrons and financial supporters contributed extensively to the missionary movement of the early Church. Schüssler Fiorenza describes these tremendous contributions by women to this endeavor. She explains:

> A survey of the scattered references to the participation of women in the early Christian missionary endeavor shows that the missionary work of women was equal to that of men like Barnabas, Apollos or Paul. Women were among the wealthy and prominent converts. As patronesses, they exercised decisive influence on the missionary enterprise which was similar to that of Jewish and proselyte women in

[17] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 300.

> the religious propaganda of Judaism. . . . The missionary work of women was not initiated by Paul, but he attests that it was equal to his own. Paul commends Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis because they have "labored hard for the Lord."(Rom. 16:6,12).[18]

Great tension existed in the early Church over women's ecclesiastical leadership. Tertullian, for example, claims that the Acts of Paul and Thecla are fraudulent. This alone gives good reason to reflect in the present upon how the canonization of Scripture and Church documents are affected by the struggles and polemics of the past. The development of clericalism in the Church further strengthens its patriarchal character. Along with this exclusion of women from the Church's history misogynistic attitudes still further increase. History in its being written primarily by men has not given accurate accounts of women's contributions and impact to and in the world or the Church. The exclusion of women from ecclesial authority, positions of leadership, and sacramental ordination was a purposeful attempt to prohibit their being major characters in this history. Biblical Scriptures fall victim to these misogynistic tendencies in an attempt to gain legitimacy. As Schüssler Fiorenza points out, for example:

> The author of the Book of Revelations inveighs against an early Christian prophetess whom he abuses with the name of "Jezebel." This prophetess apparently was the head of an early Christian prophetic school which had great influence and authority in the community of Thyatira. Since the author of Revelations stresses that despite his warning and denunciations the prophetess still was active

[18] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women in the Early Christian Movement," in *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 91.

> within the community, her authority seems to have at least equaled that of John, whom in turn, she might have perceived as a false prophet.[19]

The naming of the unknown prophetess as Jezebel has had its "trickle-down" effect through history. We can still experience the misogynistic ramifications of this passage by considering what is implied by the calling a of woman a "Jezebel." Ruether, referring to the male one-sidedness towards history by critiquing the accuracy of record-keeping and prevalent misogynistic tendencies, explains:

> In the case of Church Fathers, such as Jerome, Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, Augustine and others, the classical custom of collecting and preserving a corpus of such letters brings this genre of writing down to us. But no such collection was made of the letters of women. We have only the male side of the correspondence. Thus we are in a misfortunate position of having to read the lives of these women through the pens of their male admirers (or detractors).[20]

The ongoing patriarchally centered development of the Church's institutionalization and the creation of the episcopacy as the governing body of Church communities moved the Church away from the prophetic dimension. The development of the episcopacy allowed only males in this system of control and power. Authority and control granted through the "powers" of ordination that were and still are reserved for only males in the Roman Catholic Church. This has had and still does have major implications for the women members of the Church. Ruether points out the ramifications of this influence in the Church when she says:

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[19] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 298.
[20] Ruether, *Patristic Spirituality*, 156-57.

> Thus by the end of the first century, we find Christianity splitting into two contrary interpretations. One branch of Christianity incorporated its social structure back into the patriarchal family and its interpreted normative leadership as that of the male who is proven as 'PATER-FAMILIAS'. This patriarchal Christianity was engaged in a polemic with an alternative Christianity which enjoined it members not to marry and also promoted the participation of women in public teaching.[21]

The Church's move from being an inclusive prophetic community to a highly patriarchal hierarchical system allows greater androcentrism to become part of the formative Christology of the Church. As the Church developed into a patriarchal hierarchy through its institutionalization, androcentric and misogynistic tendencies become further associated with the Church's sacramental, liturgical and theological practices. During this formative period of the Church's ideologies, theology, regulatory practices and doctrine, misogyny becomes a powerful force of exclusion. The effect of misogynism is most noticeable in the practice of ordination being only conferred to males in the membership of the Church, reserving for them the "powers" of the sanctuary. Ruether comments:

> This Church also assumes that ordained leadership follows the patriarchal order of creation; celibate women are deprived of pastoral ministry and marginalized into convents, while celibacy, drawn from the monastic (and originally non-clerical) tradition is imposed on

[21] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy," *New Black Friars* 66 (July-August 1985): 329.

married priests and bishops. This synthesis of patriarchal and eschatological Christianity is passed on to the Middle Ages as normative.[22]

Limitations continue to dominate the hierarchical and patriarchal status of the Church today and remain critical for women members. Ruether describes this critical situation, saying, "Women in the Church cannot really rest with a clerical, patriarchal Church. They must struggle to convert the Church to an understanding of its mission, which will include the promotion of the humanity of women. The Church must come to recognize that patriarchy is fundamentally contrary to the Gospel and that the liberation of humanity from patriarchy is in fact an intrinsic aspect of the mission of the Church."[23] Women are not stepping aside, or resting with present practices of the Church. They are resisting. They are continuing to confront the Church. They have become Women-Church.

The Meaning of "Ekklesia"

Feminist and liberation communities seek to live out a vision of new creation in which there is a possibility of wholeness in relationship among women and men of all races, classes, sexual orientations and abilities, as well as the whole of creation.[24]

Clues to this unknown reality may be discovered in the new formation of women's spiritual support groups who gather in the round,

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[22] Ruether, "The Liberation of Christology," 330.
[23] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Of One Humanity," *Sojourners,* January 1984, 19.
[24] Letty Russell, "Searching For a Church in the Round," in *Defecting in Place*, ed. Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Loomis and Allison Stokes (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1994), 241.

searching for new connections to themselves and to the world; to God and to their communities of faith.[25]

The term "Ekklesia" is rooted in its being a Greek civil-political concept, not necessarily a religious one. Ekkesia as such means the people's right (namely free men who were elite property owners) to assemble freely and to determine their own political and spiritual matters.

The definition provided in the first paragraph is representative of ekklesia as applied to a civil-political assembly. This definition is strongly associated with the patriarchal structuring of Greek democracy, which informed the West's understanding of democracy. The Greek democratic system was layered according to class, gender and race. The highest point of the system was held by free propertied Greek men who were the "ekklesia." This "ekklesia" represented both culture and civilization.

Ekklesia when applied to religion or church may have several meanings. In the Greek Old Testament, "ekklesia" was the gathering of the people of Israel before God. In the New Testament, "ekklesia" is the gathering of the people of God as a discipleship of equals. Through contemporary New Testament scholarship we are able to gain a deeper appreciation for Jesus having called his followers into a community of disciples. Schüssler Fiorenza has called this a "discipleship of equals."[26] It was not only to the mainstream of society that Jesus reached out. He called all into a community that emphasized the importance and equality of all. Jesus welcomed the socially marginalized and the excluded of society. The early Christians, when reflecting on their nature of Church, resorted to images again and again, choosing communal ones.

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[25] Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 9.
[26] See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, " Women's History as the History of the Discipleship of Equals," in *In Memory of Her*, 99-334. See also her *Bread Not Stone*, 91-92.

Ekklesia may be used to define a specific gender group, as the "ekklesia of women." The term "Ekklesia" in this context has been brought into contemporary theology through the scholarly work of Elisabeth Shüssler Fiorenza. This term "Ekklesia" is most attributed to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutic and therefore I choose to include her lengthy definition of ekklesia for the benefit of my readers, for whom this may be an introduction to their understanding. Schüssler Fiorenza defines Ekklesia, saying:

> Since women in a patriarchal church cannot decide their own theological-religious affairs and that of their own people—women—the Ekklesia of women is as much a future hope as it is a reality today. Yet we have begun to gather as the Ekklesia of women, as the people of God, to claim our own religious powers, to participate fully in the decision-making process of the church, and to nurture each other women Christians. Baptism is the sacrament that calls us into discipleship as equals. No special vocation is given no more "perfect" Christian lifestyle is possible. Commitment, accountability and solidarity in the Ekklesia of women the life praxis of such a feminist Christian vocation. They are a central embodiment and incarnation of the vision of a "new church" in solidarity with the oppressed and the "least" of this world, the majority of whom are women and children dependent on women.[27]

Schüssler Fiorenza provides a feminist hermeneutical space that is informed by radical democracy instead of a Western logic of identity. Her reconstruction is not only a

[27] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 344.

restoration of women's stories in Christian history but is also a means to reclaim this history in effect for the realization of an inclusive ekklesia. Should faithfulness to radical democracy as key component to this ekklesia be lost, then there is no possibility for this ekklesia to be inclusive. Musa W. Dube, a feminist theologian in Botswana, speaks to this concern offering words of caution. She says, "Anything short of this theoretical commitment to the logic of radical democracy will cause the ekklesia of women to emerge cloaked in the white male discourse of imperial domination."[28] Dube argues that while Schüssler Fiorenza has empowered Western women in her reconstruction, the vehemence of imperial oppression against non-Christian and non-Western women is sustained within this particular construct. Dube says, "Because Schüssler Fiorenza does not recognize imperialism as a distinct form or exploitation that denies women and men of foreign lands their political, cultural and economic autonomy by imposing its systems of power for its own benefit, her reconstruction is not in a position to recognize and to subvert the ideological strategies of imperialism."[29] This critique jeopardizes Schüssler Fiorenza's reconstructive efforts toward the building of the "ekklesia of women" by its exclusion of Two-Thirds World women, non-Christian women and non-Christian cultures. Schüssler Fiorenza, in recognizing the exclusion of so many women and men by maintaining the theoretical articulation of the "ekklesia of women," has shifted and broadened her paradigm. She has coined and uses the term "wo/men" to signify the inclusion of the diversity of women, men, cultures and faiths that can assemble this new model of ekklesia.

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[28] Musa W. Dube, *Post Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 37.
[29] Dube, *Post Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 29.

Observing these various applications of the term "Ekklesia," it is evident that ekkelsia can also be a spiritual community such as Women-Church. Women-Church has modeled itself upon the prototype proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza. The Gospel is, as Schüssler Fiorenza illustrates, "the communal proclamation of the life-giving power of Spirit/Sophia and of God's vision of an alternative community and world. . . ."[30] Women-Church is an alternative spiritual community which is motivated and moved by the Spirit. Discernment of the Spirit is a directing force within Women-Church.

A Spiritual Community

The Spirit is of primary importance in feminist spirituality. The Spirit is as varied as is where the Spirit may be found. The Spirit/Ruah (Ezechiel 13:13) is the transforming power, divine and sometimes irresistible in violence. This same Spirit in John 3:8 is gentle and perceived as a breath. In Psalm 104:30 this Spirit is renewing, renovative and creative. In II Corinthians 3:7 the Spirit is irritating and challenging. At all times though, the Spirit is liberating and freeing, powerful and sanctifying, enabling and holy. In the Christian tradition, the Spirit has been the life force of the genesis of the Church and has been the law that is lived by.

The rebuilding and reclaiming of a feminist spirituality is paramount for the building of this ekklesia, which is being attempted by the Women-Church movement. Schüssler Fiorenza applies the concept of ekklesia as a paradigm for the formation and the future of Women-Church. She explains:

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[30] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 344-45.

> A feminist Christian spirituality, calls us to gather together as the Ekklesia . . . enables us to live "for one another" and to experience the presence of God in the Ekklesia as the gathering of women. Those of us who have heard this calling respond by committing ourselves to the liberation struggle of women and all peoples, by being accountable to women and their future and by nurturing solidarity within the Ekklesia of women. Commitment, accountability and solidarity in community are the hallmarks of our calling and struggle.[31]

Schüssler Fiorenza offers to Women-Church not only a foundation for its existence, but a place to move on to. Women involved in Women-Church are agents for transformation of the Church and for humanity. Women-Church has had to look back and draw from other resources since it is not empowered by institutional Church sanctions. Women-Church has reclaimed a spirituality which speaks and holds meaning for women that has great possibility to make a difference in the world. The women of Women-Church have put forth a spirituality for women which is rooted in compassion, solidarity, prayer and creative imagination. These characteristics are integral to feminist spirituality and are most reflected in feminist liturgical expression. Creative imagination is a powerful source for the creation of feminist liturgy. Creative imagination and feminist liturgy will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

The incarnation for the struggle of liberation for all peoples is integral to feminist spirituality. The vision of Women-Church is rooted in feminist spirituality and experience. Feminist spirituality is necessary for conversion and renewal in the churches, world and universe. There is great potential to create anew for all people.

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[31] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 349.

Women-Church as ekklesia possesses the possibility to be the gathering space where the songs of the Spirit are heard and justice is done. A gathering where all can pray freely, grow bold in the Spirit, exercises prophetic imagination. All done without fear of condemnation. This can all be accomplished, if what is truly being sought is a liberating interdependence among races, nations, genders, cultures, political structures, religions and economies.

Women-Church has a future in opening itself to the plurality of women's experiences and voices, inclusive of all races and creeds. How does a multi-religious contextualization affect Women-Church? This may be an important question to address when looking to the future of Women-Church. Can it remain Women-Church? New emphases in theology will emerge from this plurality of contextualization. Rosemary Ruether offers some clue in saying, "Feminist liberation theology opens up as a human project, not an exclusively Christian project."[32]

It is impossible to disown our histories; thus, the characteristic of ongoing reinterpretation is part of our Christian heritage. Reinterpretation opens the doors for revelation and new envisionings that are the hope not only for the Church but for humanity and all creation. Ruether addresses the access to this process, saying:

> A key impetus for radically new envisionings of redemptive hope lies in the growing plurality of women's voices in many cultural contexts. As women from African American, Hispanic American and Third World contexts find their voices as feminist theologians, many distinct contextualizations of hopes for redemption from gender injustice develop. European and Euroamerican feminists are asked to let go of

[32] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 281.

their unconscious assumption that they can represent women as a whole.[33]

The Women-Church movement is changing, growing and is on a continuous and progressive journey. Keeping Women-Church in a healthy tension is a challenge for the present and the future, keeping its sacred gift and remaining vital amidst widening scope and development. Key to this may be a constant re-imaging of God, to continue rediscovering theological assumptions. To not challenge assumptions will only turn the clock backwards and let oppression prevail. Blessed tenacity and creative imagination will bring about the realities of what is envisioned and hoped for. The Spirit does not give up on us; let us not give up on the Spirit.

Women-Church has the potential for transformation of the Church and the world in its seeking a deeper understanding of the person of Jesus, continued studying of scripture, commentaries, history and the experiences of the believing community as its own foundation.

Some Reflections

Lastly, I would like to briefly address three questions that are integral to the continued progress of this thesis: (1) What is the Women-Churchmovement for women? (2) What is Women-Church's relationship with the larger (Roman Catholic) Church? (3) If Women-Church is inclusive, who are included? In the following chapters (3 and 4) I hope to show in more detail that the emergence of these questions poses significant debate within the various Women-Church groups that have been researched for this

[33] Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 280.

thesis. I suggest that how Women-Church groups resolve these issues will contribute either to Women-Church's continuance or its passing on in time.

It is important to be aware that Women-Church as a reality is separate from the ideal. The ideal may be the hope and goals of Women-Church, yet reality presents internal struggles in Women-Church groups' own dealing with racism, classism, ecumenism, heterosexism and inclusivity. Women-Church needs to execute caution and care that in its very self it does not become the "elite" among other church women, women and people, thus, representing women of various cultures and civilizations. Women-Church needs to be cautious in its development and growth that it does not create new systems that subordinate others. The real and ideal perspectives of Women-Church clash in the strong possibility of Women-Church becoming something others (women and men) may yearn for that is unattainable or unreachable. The hope is that as an alternative spiritual community, Women-Church will continue to seek to articulate the liberation of people of all races and nations.

The relationship of Women-Church with the institutional Roman Catholic Church varies from diocese to diocese in the United States. The institutional Church's relationship with Women-Church is tense, especially at the local level (with Massachusetts Women-Church) at best. However, Women-Church perceives the tensions encountered as sources of growth for their very being. That the institutional Church severs dialogue with Women-Church, continues to dictate limitations and boundaries for women in the Church, does evoke frustration, anger and fear for Women-Church, but also produces growth beyond fear. This growth produces an inner resilience for both individuals and Women-Church groups resulting in a new understanding of church.

Sandra Schneiders adds some light to this "new understanding" of church. She says, "They are busy being church rather than trying to reform the male establishment which is usually regarded as church."[34]

The institutionalized Church may view the Women-Church movement as rebellious and resistant. This is not a new experience for the institutional Church. In all centuries there have been women who have confronted the Church through resistance while remaining active and making significant contributions.

Many of these women broke free of the stereotypes of their own time and place, and contributed extensively to the creativeness and ongoing work of redemption. Women such as Perpetua the martyr and scholar, Bridgette of Sweden, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Genoe, and Margery Kempe are examples of a few who played significant roles. Other women were of royal and elite social rank, such as Elizabeth of Hungary, Margaret of Scotland and Clotilde of the Franks. There are women who had visions of transforming existing social structures and would be considered "reformers," such as Dorothy Day, Catherine de Hueck and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. A few of these women in the past have held high ecclesiastical positions in the Roman Catholic Church, as foundresses of women's religious congregations and as abbesses of major monasteries: Hildegard of Bingen, Bridgid of Kildare and Teresa of Avila to name just a few. For most Roman Catholic Christians in their formative catechesis, however, the contributions of these women are seldom mentioned and their accomplishments usually are attributed to a male figure. Yet, women as participants in salvation history have broken through

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[34] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Effect of Women's Experience on Spirituality," in *Women's Spirituality*, ed. Joan Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 34.

stereotypes and in their time and place have contributed extraordinarily to the creativeness of redemption.

Christianity took a new turn in the collapse of the old Empire in the West. The persistent struggle between the ecclesiastical and the secular during the Medieval period is reflective of this. The theological discourses of the Scholastics during the Medieval period also give evidence to the struggle, as women were also systematically excluded. Notwithstanding the many exclusive practices during this period of history, women still maintained an active role in the Church and contributed significantly during this period. While being excluded from hierarchical ecclesial leadership positions, ordination and much of the public secular life, it is an ability of women and of historically marginalized peoples to remain counter-cultural in their expressions, actions and relationships. It is due to this practice of exclusion in the fore mentioned areas that many options of ministry remained available to women. Some of these options were in the areas of service, education, healthcare and housing initiatives. This being on the "other side of the fence, looking in" gives women an epistemological privilege to better see what is being left undone and who are being denied pastoral attention by the institutionalized Church. Monika Hellwig gives light to this. She says:

> It is not surprising, therefore, that when we do have record on the work and impact of Christian women on their societies, that impact tends to be prophetic, radical in its implications for the social structures of the society in the long run, and, in terms of social dynamics, a movement from below. Such initiatives in healthcare and education, commonly taken by women who saw them as expressions of faith called forth by

> immediate circumstances in which they lived had long-term consequences in all Western society and through colonization and international organizations have now become a challenge to the whole of the world.[35]

Women-Church might also agree to its being rebellious, and in some of Women-Church's actions, rightfully so. Women-Church is definitely alienated from the institutionalized Church but is part of a new and emerging church. Emergence is very much a part of the character of Women-Church if not a primary focus. Alienation may cause indifference. Indifference constitutes a lack of relationship. For some in Women-Church, there is no concern as to what the institutionalized Church thinks about them. Even though some may lose interest, many still do maintain a deep relationship with the Church. Negatively defined relationships still indicate relationship none the less. This continuation of relationship/membership with the Church is also a sign of hope for many who have become Women-Church. While the reins of Rome are being tightened, the forces of reaction gathering and avenues for dialogue being barricaded, this may all be discounted. Anne Brotherton offers these seeds of hope in saying:

> Conversion often occurs in 'extremis,' and that may well be the state of the institution in the months and years ahead. . . . In the meantime, hope endures in the People of God who see, even through darkness, that something profound is indeed happening—that a new age in the

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[35] Monika Hellwig, *Christian Women in a Troubled World: Can We Make a Difference?* Lecture delivered at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Ind., at the First Annual Madelva Lecture (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

history of the Catholic Church lies ahead, that the authentic and beloved tradition will be recovered in a renewed community of faith.[36]

Connected to this inquiry regarding the relationship of Women-Church with the institutional Church is also the question, Why do women continue to remain as members of the Church? This will be further addressed in Chapter 3.

Inclusiveness is one of the many challenges that confronts Women-Church. In the following chapters this issue will appear for each of the groups discussed. The challenge of inclusivity does not just arise in the formative stages of Women-Church's development, but is at present a very critical issue. How this issue is confronted will greatly impact Women-Church's future.

The question of inclusiveness for Women-Church has many faces. It is not totally limited to whether or not Women-Church allows men and children into their communities. The breadth of this issue sweeps wide. Can women of various faith traditions belong to Women-Church? If so, does Women-Church remain Catholic? Is Women-Church open to women of different races and cultures? Is Women-Church primarily a community for First World women? What about Second and Third World women? These are all important issues that need to be addressed by Women-Church, and some groups presently are looking for resolutions.

Women face many challenges in confronting the Church. Solutions are as varied as are the challenges and the locations of the struggles. In the realization that these struggles and challenges are not just unique to women in First World countries, Women-Church, like feminism, has broadened its scope and breadth. It is not enough to talk about solidarity with others who are oppressed, and feel in solidarity with them because of

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[36] Anne Brotherton, ed., *The Voice of the Turtledove* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 211.

similar experiences. The realization that there are others (disenfranchised and marginalized) in the world who may contribute to the efforts of Women-Church and not necessarily be a part of Women-Church is necessary. The welcoming of various "spirits" of various peoples can only bring about the vision in which Women-Church is rooted.

I believe that for many Women-Church groups, being a women-centered group is important, and for a stage in their development it may be necessary to exclude men and children. I think that the solutions to this situation are as varied as the groups that deal with the challenge. As Women-Church emerges, it is my opinion that men and children can be a part of Women-Church. The liberation of women in both secular society and in ministry can affect men. Perhaps in the future, people will be more comfortable in not only the selection of place of worship, time and style, but also in their companions on the journey.

All people need to be able to pray freely without fear of retribution, First, Second and Third World individuals alike. All people need a place where they can hear themselves into speech, feel themselves grow bold in the spirit and experience prophetic imagination without intimidation or fear. Women-Church does have a long haul ahead. The key to the future may be to just keep on being. I do not think there are any certain answers to the questions raised. What is necessary is to preserve the amazing spirit of God present. The spirit continues to breathe in Women-Church, stir in Women-Church and guide Women-Church.

To come up with solid solutions to the many questions and challenges as an attempt to plan the future for Women-Church would betray a lack of trust that the Spirit will continue to dwell amongst Women-Church. Women-Church would not be where it is

today if the Spirit hadn't spoken already. Continued trust is needed. It may not be for this generation or several other generations to see the fruits of the labor begun.

I am inspired by Ruether's concluding remarks in *Women and Redemption* where a pathway for the future of Women-Church and continued development of feminist theologies is laid down. She concludes, "We are only beginning to live it, to imagine its fuller implications."[37] The next chapter will demonstrate how the organization and movement of Women-Church is no longer a twinkle of some women's imaginations.

[37] Ruether, *Women and Redemption*, 281.

3

"You'll Enjoy the Holy Spirit That We Feel"

WOMEN-CHURCH: NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL

For over two decades, some Roman Catholic women have been gathering in small groups, for discussion of women's issues and the telling of personal stories. Stories that resonate with many women's experiences of discrimination, sexism, inequality, dissatisfaction, and angst. Stories filled with personal and communal pain. Stories that give witness to the starvation of women's souls to be fed spiritually, sacramentally, liturgically and, yes, even physically by the Church. Women who in all their differences share a commonality in their being seekers on a journey, seekers of justice and seekers of transformation. Initially this seeking has been sought by and for women in the Church, but as this journey has broadened in its scope, men and children have become companions on the journey.

This chapter will look at the development of the Women-Church movement in the United States in its contemporary existence of nearly three decades: Women-Church's beginning with a few women gathering in homes to several hundred women who gathered for the first Women's Ordination Conference. The chapter will continue to examine the phenomenon of Women-Church's growth at the national (United States),

regional (New England) and local (suburban Boston) levels. Next, several voices will emerge describing the roots of Women-Church as being based in simple origins of friends and home. Following will be a glance at power/authority and leadership as viewed in Women-Church communities. I would then like to move from the role of a "reporter" in order to provide a brief analysis of the gifts, strengths, obstacles and challenges facing Women-Church groups that may contribute to the shaping of Women-Church's vision and future. Lastly, I would like to draw a picture of my personal participation in a Women-Church gathering in order for my readers to share in and gain a feeling for this experience.

In this chapter, I will look at Women-Church and specific characteristics of its identity. It is my hope to convey in this chapter some of the historical origins, reasons for existence, emergent issues, leadership and struggles that give identity to these groups. My interest in Women-Church, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, is to examine the formation and motivation of these communities. I intend to investigate these communities for elements of ecclesiastical identity, self-perception, concepts of authority (power) and leadership (with implications for both the wider Church and within Women-Church communities).

That these groups remain "Spirit-filled" and "Spirit-driven" amid recent hierarchical Roman Catholic Church pronouncements gives witness to the Spirit's motivating presence in the life of Women-Church and to the transformational agency of Women-Church. The reclaiming and recovery of women's rightful place and authority in history and the Church has empowered and enabled the members of the Women-Church movement to "lift up the lowly" of the world and of the Church. The strength, endurance

and stamina of Women-Church will not only be witnessed to by words on a page but will be genuinely felt in the voices that continue to tell the story as it unfolds.

The members of Massachusetts Women-Church and the local intentional faith community that have contributed to my study belong to and work within the larger Women-Church movement in the United States. There is evidence of the growing movement of Women-Church throughout the world. Not all Roman Catholic women's groups in various countries specifically identify themselves as "Women-Church," but some are in solidarity as faith-filled individuals, groups or communities that participate in seeking a soul-feeding and life-giving transformation of the world order for all women, men and children.

Women-Church is a model of Church, considered at one time to be "new," but as historical evidence suggests, Women-Church is an icon embracing the fervor and spirit of the early church community. Women-Church calls women together to be Church. Women are self empowered and enabled to speak as church when the authority of the patriarchal hierarchy would prefer and demand silence as holy obedience. Women-Church liberates and empowers women as its members to make claims on their own spirituality and spiritual powers, to develop fully their faith-life as church and to nourish one another as the persons they are.

Women-Church is motivated by the power of its members' baptismal promises. A community of women gathered to nurture faith and give witness to the Gospel's values of love and justice for all persons. Women-Church is a community that is searching to claim liturgical symbols and language and all that is expressive of a feminist spirituality. Women-Church's work is a prophetic and visionary task. Women-Church is moving

beyond the patriarchal system of church and is laying claims to the center of church-life. The road to liberation has many paths. Feminist liturgy nurtures members of Women-Church on their journey to liberation. The communities of Women-Church provide sanctuary to the many pilgrims on the journey to liberation. Women-Church has been created and envisioned as a church where symbols speak to people's experiences, language is inclusive, a "discipleship of equals" is sought and leadership is shared.

Conception and Birth in the United States

The term Women-Church has several applications. I would like to offer three examples of these various usages: (1) the naming of the historical struggle for women's autonomy and authentic humanity in the face of patriarchal religion; (2) a specific historical movement within the last eighteen years of the Roman Catholic Church; (3) a movement which is in process at present with important possibilities and implications for ecumenism.

I would like to address several events that have contributed to both the birth and conception of Women-Church in the United States. These specific occurrences have taken place within the Catholic women's movement. Probably the factor contributing most to the origins of Women-Church in the Catholic women's movement has been the public discussion of women's ordination. Out of this discussion questions arose and were clarified. The institutional church was critiqued by women openly and the consideration of an alternative vision of church began.

I remember my first awareness of this "unsettling " movement in the Church. It was in the autumn of 1975. I read an article in a local newspaper about a questionnaire

being distributed to Catholic women in the Midwest. These questionnaires were asking if anyone was interested in gathering to discuss women's ordination to the priesthood. The number of women expected to respond was estimated at about a hundred; however, close to 1,200 showed up, with over 500 turned away at the door. This sent shockwaves through the mainstream of the Church. This meeting was held in Detroit, Michigan and was entitled "Women in Future Priesthood Now: A Call to Action." This was the inception of the national church group, "Call to Action," that has lasted for so many years and is still very active and visible in church news-making as well as church-shaking. For individuals who thought they were alone in their thinking, vision and "heresy," this experience must have been mind shattering. To be with and feel the presence of a Spirit of change permeating among so many women, to be public in seeking change at the heart of the institutional church, must have been both frightening and exhilarating! Women and men gathered to share their convictions, concerns and vision for an inclusive church. At this first convocation, the people of the church strategized and proposed resolutions calling for and demanding change. It was a vivid picture as literally hundreds of faithful members were "outside" asking to be let in. There was no need for an ecclesiastical order, as the request was for a rightful place was already given through baptism.

Drawing data from my own personal files that contain pamphlets, brochures, various news clippings and information about this event, it is quite evident the gathering in Detroit gave birth to the organization known as the "Women's Ordination Conference," WOC. In the autumn of 1978 this organization sponsored the "Second Conference on the Ordination of Roman Catholic Women." This conference was held in

Baltimore, Maryland. The Conference title was "New Women, New Church, New Priestly Ministry."

Women and men had begun to critically rethink the values that were behind the ecclesial system. In doing so, the power behind maintaining the status quo and the manipulative devises imparted by church hierarchy perpetrating the self-interest of a male clergy were exposed. The larger question formulated out of this then asked what other areas of church teaching and church life were also so abusive and canonized in tradition.

At this conference, women proclaimed their call to priesthood in the Church. Priesthood for them did not mean the present priesthood, but a new and changed priesthood. The theological analysis of this conference was drawn from the raw materials of personal experiences. Another development was the critique not only of Church patriarchy and how it supported other larger patterns of patriarchal cultures, but of the interconnectedness of oppressive structures of racism, sexism, heterosexism and classism. The recognition of personal experiences of oppression brought forth the acknowledgment of being participants in the oppression of others. The need to further critique other systems of the world became evident. Critical analysis of social, political and economic systems around the globe and of the ecclesiastical "empire" were necessary. Women's experience became the basis for theological reflection. The starting point was personal experience in analysis of systems of oppression. Authority was firmly grounded in the interpretation and describing of these experiences. The following statement was issued at the Baltimore Conference:

> It has become increasingly evident in this conference that there are at least two distinct positions on the question of ordination of women. (1)

> Some among us are deeply committed to the pursuance of ordination for women within the present Church system and see the involvement of women with the present structure as leading to significant changes of the ecclesial structure. (2) On the other hand, some among us have a perspective of ministry which can only be lived out in the context of a wholly different economic, social and political system.—We acknowledge these different positions as being expressive of different visions of the Church[38]

I have included this statement because I think it reveals the visionary and critical character of Women-Church. Major contributions were made in Baltimore by women from various backgrounds and experiences that gave birth to Women-Church. The women's ordination issue indirectly prepared the way for Women-Church. At the time there were other issues that may have not been as public, which nurtured Women-Church as well. How women reflected theologically was changing, as were their experiential bases. As the Church moved into a post–Vatican II mode, it began to feel the priest shortage. The Order of Diaconate for men resurfaced without the required celibacy.

Further questions began to surface. This was only the beginning of the challenge. Where does power come from, who exercises it, why? Could the Church be church without priests? What would it look like? The definition and restriction of spiritual power and moral authority were being questioned. As both reaction to and a response to these positions and actions of the Church, many women abstained from attending Sunday

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[38] Maureen Dwyer, ed., *New Women, New Church, New Priestly Ministry: Proceedings of the Second Conference on the Ordination of Roman Catholic Women* (Fairfax, Va.: Women's Ordination Conference, 1987).

Mass. Individuals also refrained from making financial contributions to the institutional Church and instead contributed to the Women's Ordination Conference and Call to Action. The hierarchy declared these actions negative and this imposed further despair and isolation on women, but it motivated them out toward life and a new vision in the creation of Women-Church.

Chicago was the "hostess" of the 1983 first national Women-Church Conference, "Women-Church Speaks." Over 1,300 women gathered. The majority were Catholic women, with a small number of "women-oriented men" and a smaller number of Protestant women. The conference was bi-lingual. Workshops and presentations were made in English and Spanish. The Catholic women's movement was widening.

The 1987 meeting of Women-Church convened in Cincinnati. The conference was called "Women-Church: Claiming Our Power." Resourcing my own collected materials shows that a breadth of inclusivity was witnessed at this second conference. A speaker at this conference was Kwok Pui Lan, an Asian feminist theologian known for her scholarly work and publications in the areas of religion and culture, Asian religions and women's studies. Catholic women, Protestant women and Jewish women gathered to be supportive of each other as well as to claim their space. Participants came from twenty-four countries. Women-Church was born in solidarity with feminists around the world. Women-Church raised even more significant questions that would further mold their identity; questions about Women-Church's relationship to the institutional Church, spirituality and traditions, theological language, and even the issue of whether Jesus should be mentioned were raised. Where and toward what was Women-Church moving? Was a post-patriarchal Christianity possible?

Women-Church's focus on women's religious self-determination is often times the reference point for other women's groups. Until the recent revealing of the numerous Women-Church groups in existence, most individual groups perceived themselves as being the only one. However, as is evident from the last national convention of Women-Church, different groups are a sign of the times and are on their way to becoming a mass movement. The incorporation of various groups into this movement demonstrates the scope, networking and power of Women-Church as it has grown in the lives and hearts of many women.

The large conferences are important, yet in the between years it is the weekly and monthly meetings of small groups of women and men which sustain Women-Church. It is in the living rooms and kitchens of ordinary homes that Women-Church is birthed again and again.

Being Born in Massachusetts

Another national Woman-Church Conference was held in Cincinnati, Ohio on October 11, 1987. Marie Sheehan,[39] a woman who lives in a South Shore suburb of Boston, traveled to this gathering. In her recollection of this trip she shared the following thoughts. Her mind wondered prior to her arrival in Cincinnati: How many other women from Massachusetts would be attending this gathering? Would it not be a wonderful opportunity to plan with other women from Massachusetts for a time to meet locally? She had experiential background as an organizer and when she heard that sixty-five women were from Massachusetts, she corresponded with them in advance. Following her own

[39] Marie Sheehan has contributed to this thesis through interviews and conversations and in allowing me to read several short journal pieces and notes that have assisted in the accuracy of dates, events and human emotions involved.

vision and call she corresponded with each of them. She contacted them as Massachusetts residents to gather together on Saturday October tenth during the planned caucus time at the conference. Actually, when the time came, seventy Catholic women from Massachusetts gathered at this set time during the conference.

It was a graced and blessed happening. As it turned out, there were ten groups of women who had been meeting as Women-Church in the Massachusetts prior to this meeting. What ensued was a sharing of information, ideas and goals as well as hopes and visions for the future. Women who learned that they lived in the same part of Massachusetts began planning future meetings locally. There was a tremendous feeling of excitement and affirmation. They plotted the direction and traveled the road together; no one was alone. The discussion revolved around bringing this spirit back to Massachusetts. There was a strong desire to bring all that was experienced to all those who could not attend this gathering. To do so meant to pull together resources. The need to network was a reality. While strength may be found in a group, fear may also exist.There would be those who feared the women who gathered, because of their being feminists. Some women also feared the retaliation of men in the Church. The positive side was the creation of a newsletter, organized by Rosemary Brennan, C.S.J., who requested various groups to advertise information about themselves.

The first newsletter was mailed out in January of 1988. The first meeting of Massachusetts Women-Church was to be held that month. The newsletter included information of five Women-Church groups in the state as well as the formation of a new group that was to meet at Boston College. It also announced that the Boston Paulist Center was going to present to Mary E. Hunt and Dianne Neu the Hecker Award. This

was met with great joy. For over twenty-five years, with the Issac Hecker[40] Award for Social Justice, the Paulist Center annually recognizes an outstanding North American Catholic whose life has been dedicated to building a more just and peaceful world. The Paulist Center is an intentional community of faith in the Roman Catholic tradition (located at 5 Park Street in Boston). Following this initial newsletter, others were produced and mailed periodically.

Massachusetts Women-Church convened for the very first time on January 20, 1988 at Saint Joseph's Hall in Framingham, Massachusetts. The facilitator for this meeting was Rosemary Brennan, C.S.J. The task for the day was to explore the possibilities of a Women-Church Day for all of New England that would provide an opportunity for all women groups to gather and explore the realm, realism and route of being Church. The decided upon theme was "We Are the Church." They expressed the need to claim sacred power and place. These women accepted the task to build and strengthen their own ways of celebrating, praying and worshipping together. In addition, the relational elements of bonding, forming community and claiming power were essential to future gatherings. The need to extend relationality outside the present group was expressed. Diversity was sought. Other ethnic, racial and cultural groups were to be invited and included.

Also shared were similar questions similar to those voiced by the "national" group; especially interesting to this group was the question of the importance of a

[40] Issac Hecker, founder of the Paulist Fathers, was particularly concerned with the growth and development of American Catholicism. Issac Hecker and the early Paulists devoted themselves to mission preaching, and communication of the Word of God. Hecker's spirituality involved looking to the heart, listening to the Spirit and living in America. The award was named to honor Hecker. Recipients of the award have included locally and nationally recognized women and men. Some have been involved in direct service to those in need, others in advocacy work and the transformation of structures and institutions. Mary Hunt and Diane Nue received the Hecker Award for establishing the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual that is located in Washington, D.C.

Catholic identity with the question of whether women of other faith traditions be involved. The second meeting was set for Monday, March 7, 1988 at 7 o'clock in the evening at Saint Joseph's Motherhouse on Cambridge Street in Brighton, Massachusetts.

The second meeting of Massachusetts Women-Church was attended by twenty-five women. Problems occurred as no consensus regarding diversity could be reached. Energy and emotions were highly intense. Possibly the make-up of the group was too homogeneous (white, Irish, Roman Catholic) to settle the disagreement about diversity.

The primary topic of discussion in this meeting evolved around the point of "inclusion vs. exclusion." Should women of other faith traditions be invited and welcome? Should the group just primarily focus on their work as Catholic women and strengthen themselves and their agenda? The agenda of this group is quite different compared to the initial agenda of the national group. What part does demographics play in the birth of Women-Church? How does demographic location define Women-Church? What unison can there be in Women-Church if demographics can dictate inclusion or exclusion? I have no answer at this point.

The outcome of this meeting had its positive side. Diversity was important to the group. Also considered were the connections of feminine energies, sexuality and spirituality. Important to the group were the needs to celebrate rituals, prayer and differences. The recognition of questioning how this group might be responsible and contributive towards the oppression of others resonates with the same inquiry of the national group. The writer/recorder for the evening wrote:

> Perhaps there was a sigh of frustration or perhaps that sigh was the breath of life, the breath of God, Ruah, within us. As the evening drew

to a close, Marsie reminded us that we are giving birth and that labor is tough. Marsie also used the image of how this process for her is like creating an album where she creates 24 different tracks from different instruments and people's voices and puts them all in a mixing bowl—the product is totally unexpected at the end. Perhaps we are making a record. If it's like Marsie's music, we know it will be beautiful.[41]

The next meeting was to be May 2, 1988. The agenda was totally devoted to the issue of inclusivity vs. exclusivity. The agenda was focused on what does inclusivity mean to Massachusetts Women-Church and what is Massachusetts Women-Church going to do about it? The group suffered from being torn. One faction felt it necessary to uphold rootedness in the Catholic/Christian tradition. The other felt it important to network and form a coalition. A coalition with other women would strengthen the identity of Women-Church through their interconnectiveness. The dialogue that ensued produced the following statement:

> Massachusetts Women-Church is a coalition of believing women whose struggle and spiritual exercise is rooted in the Catholic/ Christian experience. Massachusetts Women-Church is working to make their vision of liberation in the church and the world a reality. We as participants in Women-Church come together to experience the true meaning of church as the people of God: to be enriched, to

[41] Marie Sheehan, as recorded in her personal writings of this event The person who wrote this was not credited in her notes.

dialogue and to worship together. Our local Women-Church will work towards making this a reality.[42]

Distinctions of status and privilege in this grouping were lacking in an attempt to keep it along more of an egalitarian model. The issue was debated early on and continued to be a central topic of discussion. It is interesting that so early on in the formation of this group issues of inclusivity and exclusivity are so predominant. The next general meeting of Massachusetts Women-Church was scheduled for April 1989.

A planning group met in September and discussion about locating a speaker took place. At this meeting it was decided that someone from within the Massachusetts Women-Church community would make for the best presentation for this upcoming conference. The agreed-upon theme was "weaving." Themes to be emphasized would be: weaving, weaving of women, bonding, affirming the person of women, affirming diversities, forming a fabric of women weaving together Women-Church, being at "home" in Women-Church and affirming women as the feminine face of God. Keeping affordability in mind, so that many would be able to attend, it was decided that the fee would be five dollars; individuals could bring their own bag lunch and beverages would be provided.

The event was beginning to take shape, as the minutes of the January meeting clarified. Speakers, liturgy planners, music and dancers were arranged. The keynote speaker was to be Peg Hutaff, an original member of "Call to Action" and an instructor of Christian Scripture at Emmanuel College in Boston. Other local Women-Church groups had offered to offset the financial costs. To help defray costs, women crafters, artists, etc. were invited to exhibit. The first Tri-State Women-Church Conference for New

[42] Sheehan, from personal writings.

Hampshire, Maine and Vermont was announced to be held on March 31 through April 1, 1989. At the planning meeting of February 16, 1989, the Massachusetts Women-Church Conference wrote a congratulatory letter to Massachusetts' first African American woman Episcopal Bishop, Barbara Harris. The final planning meeting of Massachusetts Women-Church, before the April conference, was on March 16, 1989.

One hundred thirty-two eventually registered for the first conference of Massachusetts Women-Church. One hundred and sixty persons (including two men) actually attended.

Peg Hutaff, speaking about diversity and flexibility in Women-Church, said, "'If you're a relative new-comer and you have been finding it hard to figure out exactly who and where and why and what Women-Church is, then you are probably on the right track.' She was tempted to say that this is disorganization, for it is a community with open arms, with elastic boundaries, meant on purpose to be that way. The over all purpose of this meeting was for those gathered to claim their own authority, to do their own theology and to commit themselves to an inclusive vision of inclusion."[43]

Following the keynote was an open-mike session for women to come forward and respond to the experience. Many workshops and round-table discussions followed. Liturgy, songs and dancing were part of the day. Unified in spirit, those gathered recited an excerpt from Claire McGowan's *The Volcano Within.*

> We are Women-Church, we will not be silenced, and we will not go away. We will forward the power of our holy one and the power of our holy love. We will allow the living of God herself to continue to explode in and through our lives until the face of the earth has been

[43] Quoted as accurately as possible in Sheehan's personal journal recalling this event.

transformed and new life springs forth from the very same stony mountains that everyone said could never be changed. This is our faith. This is our spirituality. This, my friends, is Women-Church.[44]

At the meeting of May 1, 1989, evaluations of the conference were read. They were generally favorable and encouraging. The issue arose of how to structure leadership and governance for the group. Up to this point, one person had been the chairperson and had constructed the agenda. It was pointed out that this was a form of control, which took on patriarchal characteristics. Interesting as it may be, some saw this as an action of control, while others were grateful that one person decided to do the work on her own. This usually happened when the leadership position for a following meeting was offered, and no one volunteered. The decision was made that the leadership would rotate, and that the role of recorder would also rotate from person to person. The chairperson for the next meeting would ask for an agenda for the following meeting. Interestingly enough, what was stressed is the importance of seeing that individuals who took the initiative to lead or place an issue out for discussion would not be made to feel guilty. On July 18 Paula Childs from TV Channel 7 was going to do a presentation on Massachusetts Women-Church for the television show "Our Town." Several of the members of the group were interviewed for the show to be aired on October 14, 1989. At this meeting on July 18 it was decide that the second annual Massachusetts Women-Church Day would be held on March 24, 1990.

A Harvest Liturgy was held on October 22, 1989, at Mount Saint Joseph's Academy in Brighton, Massachusetts. The themes were, harvest, blessings and birth. This

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[44] Sheehan, from personal written account; quote by Claire A. McGowan, O.P., in *PROBE: Publication of the National Assembly of Religious Women* 14, no. 1 (1986): 5.

was the first Women's Eucharistic celebration by the group. Milk, honey and sherry were poured together as the community together prayed the Eucharistic prayer. Sister Theresa Kane, R.S.M, was invited to be the keynote speaker; the theme was to be the "Sin of Sexism." Sister Theresa Kane accepted the invitation and it was re-decided that the theme of this statewide gathering would be "Proclaiming Our Power." Much publicity was done to advertise this event. At this planning meeting it was also voted that the Massachusetts Women-Church would endorse and sign the "Call For Church Reform" advertisement sponsored by the Call to Action group. This endorsement would appear in the *New York Times* on Ash Wednesday of 1990. Other activist events were announced to the group, such as Chicago Catholic Women's boycott of Catholic Churches on Mother's Day of this same year and the creation of "Mary's Pence" rather than participation in the pontifical collection of money for "Peter's Pence."

The final meeting in preparation of the "Proclaiming Our Power Day" was on March 6, 1990. On Friday, March 23, the organizers of the event met to set up room 38 at Mount Saint Joseph Academy in Brighton, Massachusetts. As the group gathered in a circle to ask the Spirit's presence and blessing to be with them in undertaking this endeavor, Sister Theresa Kane walked into the circle, ready to proclaim the power of Massachusetts Women-Church.

Where Massachusetts Women-Church was to go and where it will go can only be placed in the hands of Holy Wisdom. . . . or as a woman participant voiced, "Walker, there is no road. . . we will make the road as we walk."[45] Amen.

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[45] Sheehan, from personal notes on "Proclaiming Our Power Day."

Alive Locally

Since May of 1994, eight local women have been gathering on a monthly basis as an intentional faith community of women. One woman in particular has provided much of the information pertaining to the local Women-Church group described in this section. She has supported my efforts in conducting this study and has contributed to the formulation of my analysis through much time spent in interviews and conversations over the past four years. She, like the other seven women in this local group, is Caucasian, lives in a suburb of Boston, has a graduate-level education and is economically situated in the upper-middle class. She is also a member of a large suburban Roman Catholic Church and is employed by the Archdiocese of Boston as a Pastoral Associate in full-time ministry.

In this section of the chapter, I would like to briefly look at the how this group started and address the experience of leadership in this group, as well as the goals, liturgical practice and vision maintained for the group's future. This group of women shares many similarities with the groups which I have mentioned previously. The idea of gathering was in the minds of some of the women who belong to this group for quite some time, prior to their actual getting together. One woman who is very involved in the Catholic organization "Call to Action" extended a verbal invitation to seven women who were either participants in Massachusetts Women-Church or Call to Action. The ideal of meeting at a central location, brought together eight women who live within a twenty-mile range of each other. These woman gather from the communities of Wellesley, Natick, Lexington, Framingham and Waltham. All of the women are or have been practicing Roman Catholics. They are economically located primarily in the middle to

upper-middle class. They are all college graduates and several have postgraduate degrees. The group is comprised of women who are married, divorced and single. Age groups represented in the group are of women in their forties, fifties and sixties.

At the time of their first meeting, several topics were discussed. These topics included a focus and rationale for this group's coming together. It was decided at this time to keep the group small. Women shared their stories. Discussion evolved around women's issues and all were unanimous in their feelings of resentment towards practices of inequality towards women by the Roman Catholic Church. It was decided that the group would meet monthly. Various books and articles were suggested for members' reading which would then be the focus for further discussions. The suggestions for reading materials were always made very congenially. Various articles were read and discussed.

The leadership of the group has been very collegial. Usually, the person who convened the group or hosted the group assumed the leadership role. No real thought was given to leadership. The use of individual gifts and talents allowed for group members to take on or assume various roles. It became the custom that two members planned a prayer service that took place during some part of the gathering. It was eventually decided that prayer would end the gathering. From the very first gathering, it has been the practice of the group during their prayer to call to mind and into their presence others who are not members of their group. This "bringing persons in" to their prayer has become a tradition of their prayer format. The comfortability to bring others and their needs into the group's prayer has evolved in time as the group has grown in relationship with each other. Another factor which contributed to this prayer practice was the growth of trust within

the group. The group shares a strong belief in the power of prayer. The group members, being of Irish heritage, always prayed for peace in Northern Ireland (and continue to do so). Within a year of their praying for this intention, a national Peace Accord was put into place by the government of Northern Ireland as an effort to put an end to the violence between Protestant and Catholic sectors. This outcome may have been highly coincidental, yet the ethnic roots of being women of Irish Catholic descent made prayers for peace a priority for the group

There is no formal structure to the group; it is very loose, in resistance to patriarchal and hierarchical structures. During the first year, there were no real "trust" issues to be dealt with. The initial meetings centered the group in getting to know one another and in coming to understand their common journey.

The following account was told to me in an interview with Francine Corcoran Edwards. The topic of our discussion at the time pertained to the Feminist Spirituality Center and events that followed, leading to some discord in the group. She explained that the group became quite excited in the early part of their second year together. In their planning and looking ahead, the possibility of starting a Feminist Spirituality Center at a local college became a hope and goal for the group. A member who is a faculty member of this local college had strong feelings that the center would have access to assistance from college chaplains and publicity if it located and was affiliated with this Catholic College. The group began having to deal with questions similar to those dealt with by the national Women-Church group and Massachusetts Women-Church. The idea was for a Feminist Spirituality Center. Would this center exist just for women? Would the center welcome men? Would the center focus on Catholic spirituality for only Catholic women?

Could the center be inclusive of women of other faith traditions? These were questions which needed to be dealt with. With the many concerns, expressions of personalities and individual agendas at hand, there was much to be dealt with. One decision was made very easily. Since this was to be a spirituality center for women, it would be exclusively for women, especially in regard to rituals and liturgical celebrations at this time. It was felt that perhaps in the future, there could be room for more inclusivity. Discussion evolved around possible offerings for programs and speakers specifically for women. The question yet to be answered, through the many meetings that followed, was pertaining to whether this center should or would be ecumenical or not. The following six to eight months brought the group together more frequently than the usual monthly gathering. There was great excitement among the members of the group. Amidst this excitement, things simultaneously were "shot to hell." During this period, for the first time the question, "Who is in charge?" came into being. Two individuals emerged as self-appointed leaders and had taken the center project into their own hands, with no malice intended. They moved forward on the project, meeting with college administrators, etc., without consulting or involving the other group members. While the group was in agreement about starting this center, they became upset, and the group felt its first "friction" regarding leadership and power.

Resolution to the leadership struggle began with several of the members meeting on their own to discuss the situation at hand. It was decided that the small group would not meet separately from the monthly meeting, in attempts to not create a divisive dynamic of an "us against them" scenario. Even during this period of struggle the women

of this group still gathered at a member's home and sat around a dining room table in efforts to come to resolution over this conflict.

The struggle for "someone to be in charge" lasted over a period of four months. Two individuals could not bring themselves around to admitting that the group was initially set up to not have a prescribed "leader." No resolution was quickly met. The members of the group decided to "ride out the storm." As a result two members left the group and the dynamics of the group changed considerably. For the following year, the group dealt with addressing the loss of the two members. There was sadness and pain in the loss, as individuals were still in contact with the two who had left the group. There was tension that still exists within the group. The group continued as six until later in the year a member asked the group about inviting another to join. The group welcomed the thought of a new member, new life and moving on. The group now has seven members.

Through the experienced difficulties of this group, as it underwent this particular struggle for leadership and control, the goal and vision of a Feminist Spirituality Center fell apart and never came into being. Yet, the group lives on and seeks life-giving sources for its continuance. In doing so, the group has taken on a more theological agenda. They have for the past year been looking at the person of Jesus in a new way, attempting to broaden their world-view, trying not to be so narrow and parochial. They have become more involved in creating rituals and liturgies for their group to celebrate. While a few women are apprehensive about the celebrating of the Eucharist, they have done so. There is a future for this group, especially in their finding a way for themselves. There are hopes for the group to become more engaged in social justice work, but at this present time developing and growing in their spiritual strengths will help them endure. They have

expressed the awareness of their comfort zone, as they are so insular and homogeneous in make-up. They are conscious of the need to broaden themselves and their membership. They continue to be involved in Massachusetts Women-Church and are active in Call to Action. They are a small group, an intentional faith community, very much a domestic type of church and they are making small but significant strides. They are on the walk.

The members of this small local group, like other Women-Church groups, are seeking ways to be Church, and also are seeking to define what kind of church they are. Is it going to be possible to define "what kind of church" they are? Perhaps not. What they are sure of is that they are not comfortable in typical Roman Catholic Church communities. They do know they belong to the Church. They are women of faith, women of Women-Church and companions of the many who share the same journey.

Households and Friends

Women-Church is for many women like a home, a domestic church. Letty Russell suggests that Women-Church is an example of a "Household of Freedom." She says:

> A household of freedom has no one structure or shape; it simply represents the two or three—or two or three thousand—gathered in Christ's name and seeking participating in Christ's continuing housekeeping ministry for the world. Often these households are found within established congregations in the form of sanctuary churches, basic Christian communities, or shalom communities working for justice and peace.[46]

[46] Letty Russell, *The Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 95.

The model for Women-Church is the egalitarian early Christian community. There is no one type of community, as it takes on the multiple identities of its many members, both women and men. Schüssler Fiorenza defines Women-Church as "a feminist movement of self-identified women and women- identified men [which] transcends all traditional man-made denominational lines."[47]

The core of most Women-Church communities is the embrace of voluntary, nonhierarchical, committed friendship. Most groups are formed by friends, friends inviting friends. The words following are those of voices I have encountered through my speaking to and my inquiry of women involved in various women's communities. These voices excite me because of the depth and breadth of where they come from. I include them as they have been spoken. Group members in a consensus of feelings asked me not to put individual names to their statements. The unanimous feeling was that their many voices gave strength to their one voice as Women-Church. One woman commented:

> Because we could no longer wait to be fully included in our local parish church, we began a small group. We did this because we are concerned about the Church our children will have to belong to. We had this vision of how wonderful it would be for our daughters and sons if they would finally have a church where they could worship as equals. Most of us feel that we will be long-dead before most of the human race is looked upon as equal by the Church. . . .

A husband and wife had this to say:

> We were unhappy with all male-purist liturgies and we decided to invite a few friends to begin a feminist inclusive faith community

[47] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 7-8.

which began meeting in our home. Our group began out of a basic experience of frustration and pain. We finally decided to get on with it, if we didn't do it, who would do it for us? . . .

Two women said:

We invited our friends to get together to discuss the role of women in the Church, this was in 1980, that was our beginning. . . .

Another woman commented:

I do not like the way women are treated by the traditional Church. I do not like sexist language. The oppression of women by Church hierarchy and by Church teachings outrages me, I was invited to join a group. I did so because I want to bring about change and live my faith constructively. I came here because of my inability to trust, live and exist within a patriarchal Church.[48]

What then are the issues which are central and core to Women-Church? Here I think it most pertinent to emphasize the demand that Women-Church be taken seriously. It is quite evident that most groups, by their very nature, are similar in many ways. Their very essence is about relatedness, about being interconnected and interacting. I think the depth of spirit rooted in Women-Church is wonderfully pointed out by the following vision of Leonardo Boff in his description of base community life:

Christian life in basic community is characterized by the absence of alienating structures, by direct relationships, by reciprocity, by a deep

[48] Statements provided by participants in a discussion group I facilitated while attending a Massachusetts Women-Church Conference at Wellesley College on September 11, 1999.

> communion , by mutual assistance, by community of gospel ideals, by equality of members.[49]

Joan Chittister describes these attributes of Women-Church communities in her comments:

> The function of community life is for us to be and do together what we cannot possibly do nearly as well alone. Can you pray alone? Yes, you can. Can you pray better in a group that enhances and is a vehicle for your prayer? Yes, you can. Can you work alone? Of course you can. Will you work with more energy and probably more effectiveness if you're working with a group of similarly-committed people? Yes, I think you will. Will you be a sign of Christian presence and sense of community alone? Certainly. Will you be an even stronger, clearer, more capable sign of community if you're supported by people who think about community the way you do? Yes, you will.[50]

It is not only my view, but that of many women who have dialogued with me, that church can be a home. I am aware of the dualistic nature that home can present. My use here is aligned to the "household" context as suggested by Letty Russell. Whereas Women-Church is the faith journey of many, I think it is very much like the seeking described by Nelle Morton, who wrote, "I came to know home was not a place. Home is

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[49] Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 4.
[50] Joan Chittister, O.S.B., *Women Strength* (Kansas City. Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 166.

a movement, a quality of relationship, a state where people seek to be 'their own,' and increasingly responsible for the world."[51]

All of the groups that have come together are made up of individuals who have responded to an invitation as they have moved toward self-authorization. In this process, women are cautiously beginning to trust their own lives. In their communal and individual journeys they are being enabled to shape and define their own pathways to God. The fundamental characteristic of Women-Church I have come to know through my study is the denunciation of all forms of patriarchy and its sometimes more benign ecclesiastical expression in the many forms of paternalism.

Power, Authority and Leadership

It is necessary to address power/authority and leadership as it exists within Women-Church. The formation of Women-Church has grown out of the experience of oppression and abuse of power and authority. Ideally, rather than power which has dominion over, the effort made by Women-Church is to create power which is exercised through self-confirmed empowerment and authorization. If this is true, then the transformation for a new creation liberated from patriarchal hierarchy is highly possible. Letty Russell contends that it is possible to be liberated from this patriarchal archetype of power and authority. Schüssler Firorenza has created a prototype, suggesting that the past is not binding or unchanging but more or less "is critically open to the possibility of its

[51] Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), xix. Quoted in Russell *The Household of Freedom*, 67. Nelle Morton uses Ruth Duck's song as the theme of her collection of essays. See also the powerful rendition of this theme from a black woman's perspective in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983). "*Home Girls* provides a means to know yourself and to be known, that between the pages you start to feel at home. Because in the end, there is nothing more important to us than home."

own transformation."[52] One may then ask, What authority, and from where does Women-Church acquire its authority? If truly based on the vision of feminist theology, authority in Women-Church is drawn out not only of individual women's experiences, but is developed out of the collective experience of all women. Rosemary Radford Ruether says, "In order for feminist theology to advocate the fullness of humanity for all women, it is necessary for dialogue to continue among and with women of color, different classes and cultures."[53] How authority is exercised in Women-Church makes a difference. This shift in the patriarchal paradigm encourages authority in and through partnership of the community. Russell comments, "Authority is exercised in community and not over community and tends to reinforce ideas of cooperation, with contributions from a wide diversity of persons enriching the whole."[54]

Most Women-Church groups tend to have rotating leadership. To give evidence of this practice in various Women-Church groups, I would again like to let the voices of those I have spoke to be represented in this work. It is important to recognize that leadership in Women-Church communities is often exercised in various areas. This will be more predominantly seen in the specific groups. It is my observation that leadership is often involved in the spiritual and liturgical components of Women-Church group gatherings.

This is how it was described to me by several individuals who represented various small Women-Church groups. One person explained:

> Leadership is passed around through the group on a voluntary basis.

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[52] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 33.
[53] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 112-16.
[54] Letty Russell, *The Household of Freedom*, 34-35.

. . . Using a consensus model we choose topics ahead of time, and planning revolves around the group on a volunteer basis. . . .

Another person said:

> Usually the group plans the agenda for the next meeting, one person offers to facilitate, another few individuals may plan a prayer service or liturgy. Usually our liturgies are a reflection of the person or group that does the planning. . . .

Another commented:

> Someone hosts a meal, someone leads and plans prayer, and together as a group we choose themes and topics for our next meetings. Since we are a small group, usually we plan the meeting topics, a ritual and facilitate by twos, usually having to take turns twice a year. . . .

Lastly, one woman said:

> We have an annual planning meeting, where we plan the entire year's gatherings. Individuals or groups sign up for our community's various needs for each specific month. Every member of our community has various gifts and talents, we try to encourage all members to share these in their best capacity with the community, when they are best able. We try to "team up," so no one has to do anything alone. This adds to the intimacy of our group, this also encourages us to participate to the best we can, no one feels left out.[55]

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[55] Continued comments from discussion groups at Massachusetts Women-Church Conference, September 11, 1999.

Women-Church strives to create an authority based in partnership, mutuality and inclusiveness. I will speak more to this in the following chapter when addressing the future of Women-Church. The naming of power, the building of networks and the transformation of power are all in part integral to the "home-base" Women-Church is attempting to maintain.

Gift, Strength and the Challenge of Staying

Women-Church has taken shape in breaking the silence of women's voices in the Church. Their own voices have spoken about God. New depths are probed through these voices, to claim new historical powers and to procure new understandings. All these attributes give shape to a "new household," a household that has accepted a new responsibility. In the breaking of the silence of women's voices in the Church, Women-Church has been awakened in the present to hear other silenced voices. In this realization, a kind of solidarity has developed with others who suffer silently. I would project the hearing of other silenced voices is a necessary link to the future for Women-Church. Women-Church must make the conscious effort to practice inclusivity within its self. The question many may ask is, "Why do women stay in the Church or Women-Church?" especially in the light of women's own recognition and realization of the oppressive structure within Roman Catholicism. I can only attest to the strong sentiments expressed, that the Church is a women's church. Liberation is central to the message and tradition of the Church. Perhaps being a member of Women-Church has provided some moments and glimpses of this liberation. Perhaps it has been significant enough to nurture hope, sufficient enough to provide knowing and a faithfulness to the transforming power of the

Gospel. I recall in reading "Jesus: Lord or Brother: A Feminist Critique," the appendix of Carter Heyward's *The Redemption of God,* her own questioning of women leaving the Episcopal Church. This is an early writing of Heyward, and I know that much of her thinking to this present time has undergone transition. Yet it is evident, at the time of the writing of *The Redemption of God*, that she herself is troubled by women's departure from the Episcopal Church. I would dare to say: I think she is less troubled today as she has continued on her own personal journey in or outside of the Episcopal Church. However I still am drawn to her remarks on "staying in the Episcopal Church" because I think it speaks to the historicity, mission and longevity of women remaining in Women-Church. She says:

> If she stays and chooses to struggle, what might be her lot? To trust that God is God and that she is with God. And that just as she is justified by God in the act of her openness to God, so too is God justified by her in the active presence of God in her life, her work her choices, her death. God is and will be, for the world what she chooses to do with God and for God in the World.[56]

There is power in the living and preaching of this gospel within Women-Church. To accomplish this level of community that is based in partnership, mutuality and inclusiveness, it is necessary to turn to another theological perspective, one which embodies these characteristics as well as challenges other theologies. Heyward's "On

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[56] Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Lanham, Md.: University of America Press, 1982), 202.

Staying in the Church: God and Power" offers insight to the meaning of women's "staying power"[57] in Women-Church. She writes:

> She will learn, she will know, that when God acts, it is with power. And that God's power is that which equalizes human power—redistributes it—whereby there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, Christian nor non-Christian, gay nor straight, rich nor poor, white nor black, teacher nor student, but rather people together on the earth. . . . God's power equalizes. . . . To equalize is *not* to neutralize; it is to make equal; to make just; to overthrow, if necessary, the racist, classist, sexist, dehumanizing structures and attitudes that impede the growth and livelihood of <u>all</u> people. If as Soelle maintains our hands are God's hands in the world, our power is God's power in the world—if we choose to do what is loving and just.[58]

The reality is that there is power in staying. I firmly believe from my own experience of staying and being in solidarity with Women-Church for over eighteen years that women stay because it is just and loving to do so. I am not implying that in situations of abuse, violent behavior towards another or other forms of mistreatment of persons, staying in these kinds of situations grant power. I am stating this in response only to the question posed regarding why women remain in the Church or Women-Church.

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[57] I am taking poetic license here, but am convinced that in this situation of remaining or staying a member of Women-Church there is a graced power that is interrelated to God's power. I simply refer to it as "staying power." If members left, then what power does Women-Church have? Thank you, Carter, for this opportunity.

[58] Heyward, *The Redemption of God*, 202.

Another challenge, I believe, rests in the transformation and conversion from structures which oppress those who are called to be Church, and those who are called to full participation and ministry in the Church though their baptism. Russell offers not only operable suggestions but has had a significant input in the theological conceptualization of church being a community of partnership, mutuality and inclusiveness.

While there are many challenges to confront, one of the many is the call to discipleship, which is both a call and response to the Word of God, in its many varieties. It is not only that women have come to accept and respect the credibility of their doing theology, but also the discovery that feminist theology is rooted in women's experience which has given to humanity (and the Church, even if marginal in the Church) a new process which expanded and revitalized theology. In the lives of Roman Catholic women, this has become a liberating powerforce.

Theology shapes our experience and experience shapes our theology. Feminist theologians of all races, classes and creeds have drawn on their own experiences as women and those of conversion to articulate the foundations of a theology which is wholistic, collaborative, relational, mutual and inclusive. Inclusive not only of human creatures but the entirety of universal creation. Sallie McFague's work in creating an ecological theology demonstrates well this concept of "inclusion." While she uses Christian tradition, she is clear to indicate it is not solely an endeavor of Christianity. McFague suggests:

> Christianity can also offer to the planetary agenda vision of the liberation, healing and inclusion of the oppressed, and in our day must include vulnerable nature. Radical embodiment and radical inclusion

of the outcast—these are not only signs of the new creation, but they are essential ones.[59]

Most significantly, Women-Church has made it quite evident that humanity for women can only be defined by women in the fullness of all its dimensions, this fullness inclusive of Christian dialogue within the Church. It is apparent that this dialogue is a functioning component of the theology of Women-Church, as it is a theology that is capable of leading to a new expression of the Church, and new experiences of Church. This is just one theology of many theologies that interconnects and motivates Women-Church. I perceive this as contributing to the hope of transforming the Church towards a genuine faithfulness to the gospel. This journey is not just a new journey for women, but is a new journey for the whole Church.

Small Group Gathering: "Come In"

It is a balmy spring evening, warm for late April in 1997. While welcoming the sun being still so high in the sky, it is at one of those blinding angles that make the ride on route 128 South slow and cautious. Following given directions, I am soon parking my car in front of a ranch style home in a suburb south of Boston. I am curious and at the same time apprehensive as I approach the front door. This is my first time actually being with this small Women-Church group for their monthly gathering and liturgy. I have met most of the individual members previously, as they have contributed to this thesis in various ways. Yet, this time is different, as I feel I am emerged somewhat deeper into the heart of their being a group.

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[59] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 207.

I am warmly greeted at the door and reintroduced to some of the group as I am led through to the living room. Women are standing and chatting around in a typical living room setting. Several women are seated around the dining room table looking through a Bible and various other books. Another woman is unfurling a runner on the top of the table, while another places two pillar candles, a pile of river rocks, a clear glass bowl full of water and a cutting board with a loaf of bread (which appears home-baked) on top. Women gather into the dining room, conversations seem to dim, while candles are lit and a large green Mexican glass goblet filled with burgundy wine is added to all the items that are already on the table. A few other members are in the kitchen, waters running, plates clinking, coffee is being made and an assortment of fruits is being arranged on plates and in bowls. Silence has not really arrived, as individuals are still conversing, laughing and just catching up with what has happened during the weeks since they were last together. From what I could pick up, conversation topics covered jobs, family, life in general and some discussion about church parish happenings. Everyone seems to be in a waiting mode, which does not last too much longer, as the last expected person appears through the living room.

Conversations do end, and everyone begins to settle in chairs around the dining table. A little commotion takes place as making sure individuals with various needs have "more comfortable" chairs, but soon enough and suddenly there is silence. I sit next to a woman I have just met. I look around and am impressed by the "naturalness" of the silence which has permeated the small room. No request, no announcement, it just arrived. Glancing around, I notice heads bowed, eyes closed, some hands folded on the table top and I hear some deep, deep breaths being inhaled as well as exhaled. Silence,

for a good five to seven minutes, which seemed like a half an hour. Suddenly, yet quietly, one woman welcomes all, greeting each person to her home with a comment directed for each person individually. She then proceeds to make several announcements pertaining too events that the group may be interested in, and then introduces the theme for the evening's prayer service. While continuing to say a few words, or an "Opening Prayer," Vivaldi's "Four Seasons—Spring" (*Primavera*) beings to play quietly on a CD player.

Quite spontaneously, at least it appeared unrehearsed, another voice began to pray out loud, praying for individual members of the group, their families, events in life they are dealing with, and then as I remember, prayers for the Church. Individuals added to these intentions, while others joined in unison at times with a response as, "Hear our prayers." Then there was silence again, only to be broken in a short time by a women standing, and beginning to read from the Gospel of John (4: 5-30), the story of the woman at the well.

The woman who welcomed and said the Opening Prayer put forth some questions for a discussion pertaining to the reading: "What are the 'wells' that we encounter in our lives?" "Who and how are we refreshed?" There were moments of silence, and then individuals contributed comments, thoughts, and emotions swelled as personal "wells" were brought into the group. I remember commenting, "Wells frightened me because I recalled stories of children falling into them. Usually when I feel abandoned, isolated and far removed, the image of a well comes to mind. A well isn't always a place of refreshment." The sharing continued amid laughter, sighs, and even some tears.

The person who began the service (I am going to presume to refer to her as the leader of the service) then lifted the bowl of water. The water welled to the sides, creating

a wave effect as the bowl was unsteadily raised up. She moved to the end of the table, being a short distance from anyone seated. We were then asked to take a river rock off the table, walk over to the raised bowl of water and offer a petition of some form and gently place the rock into the bowl. As people rose from the table, Carolyn McDade's song, "Come to the Water," was played. Reverently, individuals approached the raised water bowl, and voiced various petitions. All petitions seemed to be for liberation from the various "wells" in life. Wells which oppressed individuals from being able to live and be the Good News. After all had done this, we returned to seats around the table. We were then asked to take a rock from the bowl, and from the petitions expressed, say how we could help tear down those wells which are oppressive or inhibiting. I was impressed by the nuance of the imagery of the well. Usually I would have seen the rocks as materials to build a well; instead, these were the rocks torn from the well, bathed in fresh water, freed and liberated to tell the Good News.

In very simple words, the leader then took the bread, blessed it and broke it. The bread was passed to all around the table, as we broke it again and again. The bread was not broken and given to us, we each broke it ourselves. The leader then took the cup, blessed it and passed it to all.

I was so moved by the spirit of the group. Silence, different from imposed silence. Faces were aglow from soft candlelight, yet radiant from the actions just completed. Suddenly, smiles seem to be on every face, chairs were pushed back and everyone rose. The leader mentioned how we were the "face of Christ for all we meet, Christ had no body but ours." Smiles grew larger. Hugs and kisses were given, as Peace was being shared.

Still standing, feeling refreshed, renewed, empowered and I would add "holy" to the list, the leader announced next month's prayer leader/creator and the bread-baker. Several announcements followed with comments from the group. News-like and information-type conversations picked up. Group members mingled to the kitchen, coffee, juice and water came out, as did the plates of fresh fruit.

I am glad to describe this experience as "holy." It was. As I looked around, the faces I saw, the feelings I felt, all spoke loudly to me. Telling me that this is holy, and is what these women and I have been called to do. The sky did not fall, the earth did not open, fire did not spew, but the Spirit did fall upon us and we knew. The bread was consumed, the green Mexican goblet drunk of its wine and the candles were extinguished. No one left unnurished, emptied or burnt out.

In the next chapter, I will look at how the Spirit is engaging Women-Church as Women-Church looks to the future. How the Spirit is revealed in the vision, ministry, alternative Christology and spirituality of Women-Church. Addressed in this chapter will be elements of mutuality and partnership as they relate to Women-Church. Introduced in the following chapter will be the element of "creative imagination" as a life force that is integral for the ever-deepening spirituality and feminist liturgies of Women-Church. The need to remember, to believe and to celebrate continues.

4

"There Is a Sweet, Sweet Spirit"

WOMEN-CHURCH: TOOLS FOR BUILDING THE FUTURE

In this chapter I will look at several elements that I feel are both characteristics and contributions of Women-Church. Specifically, the tools I would like to look at are: inclusivity, mutuality and partnership, alternative Christologies, creative imagination, feminist spirituality and feminist liturgy. These elements contribute significantly to the way ministry is envisioned within Women-Church. I would also suggest that these elements are substantive for the future of Women-Church, because they have been ambient factors throughout the development and growth of the Women-Church movement.

One other area I would like to discuss briefly in this chapter is the controversial issue concerning the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church. The issue of women's ordination is not a primary argument of this thesis. However, I think it is necessary to address the topic briefly as this issue does relate to the shape of Women-Church in the future. Also, I would not want it to be misconstrued that to omit this topic was due to a lack of insight, concern or importance.

From the qualities and characteristics sought by women and others involved in the Women-Church movement, I would like to suggest from my perspective and experience with this movement a voice for the continuance of the work already begun by women in Women-Church. These are elements and characteristics particular to Women-Church that I believe are integral to the future for Women-Church, with potential for transformation of the Roman Catholic Church. It is with the actualization of these elements: inclusivity, mutuality and partnership, alternative Christologies, feminist spirituality, creative imagination, feminist liturgy and a new vision for ministry with which Women-Church confronts the Roman Catholic Church. I believe that Women-Church offers a great opportunity for transformation rather than reformation for the Church. While Christology, spirituality, liturgy and ministry are traditional components of the Church, Women-Church has a great capability to liberate people from the hegemonic understandings and practices associated with these tenets of the Roman Catholic Church. What are the liberating forces of Women-Church in its efforts to transform these specific areas? Using my own voice, I believe it is in the power of creative imagination and the efforts towards total inclusivity that empowers vision for the realization and actualization of transformation. The lifeline for Women-Church is in being connected with all women, humanity and creation. The range of inclusivity is broadened as this hope for transformation progresses forward with a vision of a new creation.

Women's Ordination Controversy

I have steered clear of the issue of ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church thus far in this thesis. I have done so not because I do not think the issue is of

great importance, but because it is not the focus of this thesis. This issue is one of many issues that remain controversial within Women-Church circles. Members of Women-Church are themselves at odds within the dialogue over the ordination issue.

As I have watched and experienced the evolution of Women-Church, I do not believe that ordination is any longer the primary focus for the existence or being of Women-Church. I know and am aware of women who strongly feel called to ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. For these women ordination functions as a theo/political agent that draws them to membership in Women-Church. For some women, to be denied Holy Orders is the ultimate misogynistic act of the Roman Catholic Church toward women. However, for others involved in Women-Church what is of primary concern is the creation of non-kyriarchal communities of Church, which may suffice sacramentally, liturgically and ministerially without an ordained clergy. Throughout the history of Women-Church and its predecessor the Woman's Ordination Conference (in the Roman Catholic Church), there has been the tension of the need for women to be ordained into a renewed priestly ministry, with the need to create non-kryriarchal forms of Church. Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that the gospel vision of radical democratic equality is realized within "kyriarchy."[60] The term "kyriarchal" is a term coined by Schüssler Firorenza, referring to a male-dominated church, pyramidically structured, based on a Roman imperial model. This term may also be expanded to mean the "lordship" of one group or person over another, as the result of interlocking structures of oppression.

Based on the facts that the Roman Catholic Church is experiencing a shortage of male clergy and also that younger men are not flocking to fill Roman Catholic Seminaries, I am taking the liberty to speculate that the ordination of women in the

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[60] *National Catholic Reporter*, 1 December 1995.

Roman Catholic Church is inevitable. Three reasons contribute to this speculation. I think the ordination of women is necessary in the Roman Catholic Church for the following reasons: (1) to maintain the Church's sacramental character; (2) it is a matter of both pastoral integrity and justice; and (3) the insistence of both feminist women and women-oriented men for substantive structural changes in the kryiarchal nature of the Church.

In her 1995 in her address to the Woman's Ordination Conference entitled, "Discipleship of Equals: Breaking Bread/Doing Justice," Schüssler Fiorenza underscored how for women "ordination is subordination" in a kyriarchal church. This raises a question that has occupied much of my own thinking to the depths and extent of my own personal discernment in considering ordination as a possibility for myself. My inquiry is whether ordination, as it is currently conceived theologically and practically, is adequate for any person. The reality that will more than likely contribute to this becoming an actuality can be witnessed in the shifting face of Roman Catholic worship as evidenced by and in the life of small intentional faith communities like those of Women-Church. The pastoral needs of these groups are being met in various ways. The meeting of these needs in different ways is the genesis of the transformation of the Church towards its becoming communities with ministries that are based in mutuality and partnership. To accomplish this, Women-Church must continue to live "in prophetic commitment, compassionate solidarity, consistent resistance, affirmative celebration and in the grassroots organizations of the Ekklesia of women."[61] However, at a personal level, it is my fear that Rome will eventually ordain women in hopes of maintaining kyriarchal power. Unfortunately, in my own ministerial praxis of the past twenty-five years, I am very much aware of the numbers of women who are well meaning and well trained in

[61] Schüsser Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 349.

ministerial skills, who would despite all their "feminist and Women-Church" separatism, be willing to participate in kyriarchal obedience as an exchange for sacramental legitimacy. I believe these women would serve well as priests in the current model of priesthood. The problem here lies not in the people who are priests in the Church, but in the operative model for priesthood. The present model is inadequate in meeting the pastoral, theological and political needs of a postmodern and post-colonial Church.

I am willing to put myself out on a limb in saying that the ordination of women into a kyriarchal structure is at best a destructive idea. I believe that we are confronting a precise moment in history when we need to simply revisit gender justice, but also to address the fundamental structures of kryiarchy. Kyriarchy is incompatible with and inadequate to the gospel values of justice, mutuality and equality.

The future for Women-Church drawn from its past gives concrete and viable evidence that, as a movement of feminist base-communities engaged in solidarity and sacrament, it is far more congruent with early egalitarian Christian models and more unlikely to progress towards the sanctioning of the ordination of women into kyriarchy. This presents a challenge for the future of Women-Church. The challenge is in maintaining a balance between the pressures of change, while resisting the direction of that change. From a political and symbolic framework and position it is important for Women-Church to remain supportive of women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. However, I do not perceive this as being an issue of longevity for Women-Church. What I perceive as a matter of urgency and far more important as the mission of Women-Church is the continued development and maintenance of new models of Church. It is necessary for Women-Church to stand strong against the potential co-

optation that inevitably would occur in the ordination of women, and to remain conscious in recognizing the pitfalls of kyriarchy.

Mutuality, Partnership and Inclusive Ministry

Women-Church continues to strive to develop within itself a level of ministry based on partnership, mutuality and inclusiveness. Evidence is given to this in the manner by which small groups share leadership and attempt to be non-kryiarchal. To do so means turning towards a different theological approach, an approach that embodies the following vital components: inclusivity, mutuality and partnership. This approach needs to challenge other forms and levels of ministry as well. The challenge here rests in the transformation and conversion of structures that oppress those called to ministry and full participation in the Roman Church through their baptism.

Feminist theologians have drawn from their own conversion experiences and the experiences of other women and men to articulate a foundation for a ministry that is holistic, collegial and collaborative, rather than a ministry that is patriarchal and hierarchically operative. The communal dimension of ministry as promulgated in this feminist construct is an invitation to all humans to belong to this community, a community called into solidarity in their building of the reign of God and living as the "New Creation."

According to Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel's analysis, feminist theology is founded on the tenets of liberation theology, and she identifies three similarities that are basic to both. "First, the starting point of theological thought and action is the experience of oppression. Second, the center of theological reflection is human worth, being a person

in a just order. Third, theology is praxis."[62] Reflection on the power of these principles enables conversion and transformation. Feminist theology is based in women's experiences, experiences that are both individual and communal. These qualities are quite evident through the stories of women forming Women-Church, nationally, regionally and locally.

One of the praxes of feminist theology is inviting the telling of others' stories, offering liberation to both listeners and tellers of various stories. Across the spectrum of many voices and stories, it becomes evident that while there are many similarities, each is unique and descriptive of oppression in its many guises. The power of the individual story lies in the communal dimension. The stories of oppression call into question the very value of Christianity, let alone the Roman Catholic Church. Some stories become "dangerous memories" in presenting God as the God of the oppressed; therefore oppression is good and should be welcomed and quietly accepted. Coincidentally, Jesus' resurrection is the promise of liberation for all, yet all are not liberated. The voices of Women-Church are an anthology of many stories, a culminative call to conversion. The story of Jesus is exemplary of mutuality, surrender and selfhood as criteria by which we can become sensitized and perceptive of parallels in human experience.

It is in the relationship not only shared with each other through the telling of individual stories, but also in our sharing in Jesus' story, that partnership is rooted. In the New Testament, this relationship is known as the gift of "*koinonia*" (partnership, participation, communion and community). Letty Russell further develops this concept of partnership as *koinonia.* She says:

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[62] Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing With Milk and Honey* (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1988), 69-75.

> What happens when there is a new focus of relationship in the common history of Jesus that sets us free for others? . . . Together with others we are empowered to share the common history of Jesus as the story of God in history and in our lives. This story is one of weakness, suffering and identification with others so that they may know the liberating powers of God in lives.[63]

Partnership and collaboration are necessary for conversion and transformation. I believe this is a source for Women-Church's attempt toward creating non-kyriarchal communities. Partnership requires the total participation in the ongoing discernment and responsibility for the direction and vision of the community. Partnership calls for all members of the community to function as discerners who participate in the creation of the vision and the view of the community. The inclusive nature contained in the concept of partnership as ministry is that all work toward the common good of the community. Partnership as ministry offers hope, renewal, love, compassion, respect and social concerns as dimensions of the totality of the community's members. The integration of partnership as the focus of ministry within Women-Church provides a new focus on the meaning of relationship. The focus is that relationship is perceived as a gift. Russell suggests:

> Partnership is an authority of freedom that uses people's need for solidarity and care to empower them through a relationship of mutuality. This would not be the only alternative to paternalistic and autonomous authority. Yet it would seem to be that bonds of assent based on partnership would be more responsive to God's actions in

[63] Letty M. Russell, *Growth in Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 24-25.

> freely becoming partner with humanity as well as the actions of Jesus reaching out to restore human wholeness and community.[64]

Russell's framework integrates the roles and tasks of ministry within a community as belonging to every person, therefore alleviating the need for kyriarchal structure as the basis for communities of faith to function. The functioning of the community of Women-Church is oriented toward building up the "household" both on earth and in heaven. It is in building the "household" here in present reality and experience that the "household" there (heaven) is built simultaneously. Russell clarifies her metaphor in translating kingdom as "household." She explains:

> God's reign occurs in all places, in heaven as on earth, wherever people do God's will of mending creation. It seems to me that one way of making it clear that the gospel confronts the old image of kingdom as domination and exclusion and replaces it with a new image of love and community is to use an alternative metaphor, that of household.[65]

Women-Church is strengthened through its growth in partnership. Partnership not only among its local members, but partnership which moves to include all and exclude none, partnership that recognizes the diversity of gifts and resources availed in the welcoming of all in creation. This paradigm is not new or impossible. This paradigm reveals the possibility for transformation as is evident in both the Exodus and the resurrection. The transformation is situated in the refusal to worship powers of

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[64] Russell, *Growth in Partnership*, 94.
[65] Russell, *Growth in Partnership*, 84.

domination that limit and oppress the potential for gifts to be recognized, developed and shared in the household.

Earlier in this chapter, I questioned the adequacy of ordination for anyone. I think that partnership, mutuality and inclusivity may be the avenue for the future of Women-Church. Reflective action is at the heart of the feminist constructs that have influenced Women-Church. This very action is not only an individual endeavor but is wholly communal. Reflective action demands a communal effort, a bond that is enhanced by communal action. The goal can be nothing short of partnership if the whole is moved to rid our communities, churches, even the world, of kyriarchy. The new creation and a new household become visible and accessible to all.

Alternative and Inclusive Christologies

Women-Church continues on its journey towards the future, a future that will need to continue to address and critique not only where it is going, but also to always remain in contact with how it got there. If Women-Church remains in some remote manner even to the slightest degree connected to the Roman Catholic Church, the need will always be prevalent to continue developing Christologies that are operative and Christologies that have eliminated both androcentric and mysogynistic tendencies. Christologies of this nature would present a new vision, or a re-envisioning of a Christology that would be inclusive of humanity and creation. Feminist theologies have emerged with frameworks that are inclusive of creation and the partnership of creation in redemptive action. Suggesting that creation is involved in the redemptive action necessitates a liberation of creation from gender identity. An inclusive Christology would

need to be liberated from both patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Ruether says, "In order to transcend gender hierarchy, one must transcend the order of creation which is the order of the reproduction of the species."[66] Ruether also suggests that if we were able to view the origin of nature as egalitarian in its ordering, then we would be able to view patriarchal ordering of nature as a distortion. She explains further, "The vindication of equality between sexes could then be seen as a restoration of authentic humanity through historical reforms of culture and institutions, rather than an ahistorical departure from history and embodied existence."[67] Women-Church in its efforts to resist patriarchy may contribute much to the development of inclusive Christologies. The liberation of Christologies from patriarchy and gender hierarchy gives dimension and substantial hope to the direction that a new vision may take. The difficulty with a re-envisioned Christology is in giving credibility to others of the distortions which exist in traditional and present Christology.

The establishment of an egalitarian anthropology would lend to the potential for an egalitarian Christology. Women-Church needs to address issues regarding the Christology by which it lives and is motivated. A re-envisioned Christology that views women as theomorphically equal is necessary. I believe it is necessary for the life of Women-Church to address this, especially as it expands and journeys forward. Appendix II[68] gives some examples of Women-Church members' Christological thoughts from an inventory designed as a project for a Christology course instructed by Carter Heyward. I

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[66] Ruether, "The Liberation of Christology," 330.
[67] Ruether, "The Liberation of Christology," 330.
[68] I have included this inventory (the questions and responses) as an appendix for the interest of readers. Because Christology is not the primary focus of this thesis I have not specifically written about or included information gathered from this inventory in the content of this thesis.

think it is pertinent that this data would support my proposal of the importance of the contribution of Women-Church to the development of an inclusive Christology.

I am aware that this proposed inclusive Christology would have radical implications for the traditional concept of the *Imago Dei,* since it purports that all humanity would be equally theomorphic. God could be imaged as female or male. Ruether supports this concept in saying, "If women are equally theomorphic, this also means that God is to be imaged equally as male and female. God as transcendent source of being, and God's manifestation as LOGOS/SOPHIA, can be imaged in metaphors drawn from maleness and female-ness, without subordination of the female symbols to the male symbols."[69] It is necessary to recognize the distortions which have dominated the traditional Christology of the Church. It is in the recognition of these distortions that we are liberated to rewrite, recreate and re-envision Christology, thus giving evidence to the importance of the relationship of creative imagination and Women-Church.

Some closing thoughts on factors that support this re-envisioned Christology and its relationship to Women-Church. This re-envisioned Christology places emphasis not so much on imitating the person and gender of Jesus, but on imitating the Spirit of Jesus. Women-Church has sought to return to this Spirit. Reliance on and discernment of the Spirit was once prevalent in the early Christian community. Discernment and reliance on this Spirit is both an example and motivation for a community that lives and exercises this vision. A recognition of the Jesus story as goodness to the poor, an attempt to overcome the desire for domination over any gender, race, class, sexual orientation, culture or creation itself, the continual search for transformation and the identification of

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[69] Ruether, "The Liberation of Christology," 332.

distortions will assist in bringing about this vision. The "Coming One" and the "Human One" is each of us. Women-Church contains within itself a collective memory of women, men and creation: its members, the many images of God. Women-Church already encounters opposition from those in power and position within the Roman Catholic Church, so why be deterred from continuing on the mission already in place?

The reconstruction and re-envisionment of Christology is important for the future of Women-Church. It is a component of the transformation and conversion which Women-Church seeks. Women-Church has a prophetic role as followers of the One who brought the Good News to others; it must bring the fullness of the same News to the Church.

Creative Imagination, Spirituality and Feminist Liturgy

A vision for an inclusive Christology is enhanced by the spirituality of Women-Church, a spirituality that is generated by the imagination. Imagination is an essential element of Women-Church. The use of imagination and its relationship to the spirituality of Women-Church is most apparent in the creativeness of liturgy and rituals that celebrate women. I feel the inclusive nature and potential of this relationship of spirituality and imagination is integral to the growth of Women-Church. Spirituality and imagination have lent to the shaping of Women-Church and both are a powerful voice for the transformation that is sought.

The heart of Women-Church that is most visible is its quest for liberation and justice, not only for its members, but for all humanity. At the heart of Women-Church is its rediscovery and creation of a feminist spirituality that is nurtured by the power of

imagination. In having studied traditional Christian spiritualities, I want to argue that various spiritualities all share a common task. I believe this task to be the use of imagination. Imagination opens the process of interpretation to new levels, enabling us to look at new possibilities for relationships with the Divine, humanity and creation. Christian spirituality is linked to the arts, literature, relationships, technology, social structures and science. An inclusive spirituality needs to be informed by them, as well as to inform them. Informed not in the manner of catechetizing or moralizing, but rather that those influenced by this spirituality would involve themselves, influenced by Scripture, prayer and the mandates of charity in political processes, creative acts, technological and ecological developments.

Feminist liturgies celebrated by women of intentional faith communities have been in the developmental stage for the past twenty-five years. Women-Church is a new, young and vibrant model of Church. It gathers women together to be Church and to have a voice as Church, when the hierarchical representatives of the patriarchal institutional Roman Catholic Church would prefer their silence. The gathering of women to claim their own spiritual powers, to nourish one another as Christian women and to fully develop their faith life as Church is the mission of Women-Church. Women-Church is the gathering of women claiming the power of their baptismal promises through the nurturing of their faith and their witness to the Gospel values of justice and love. Together the women of Women-Church attempt to claim and name language, symbols and liturgies that are expressive of feminist spirituality. In claiming the center of Church life, women are moving beyond the confines and oppression of the systems of patriarchy.

Why create or celebrate feminist liturgies? Feminist liturgy is a road to liberation for women who have been oppressed and eliminated by patriarchal rubrics. Feminist liturgy is a resting place, providing "sanctuary" for those oppressed, suppressed and put down in traditional liturgy. Feminist liturgies provide for communities of Women-Church a holy, "whole" space, where language is inclusive, symbols will and do speak to the oppressed, leadership is shared and the mission is towards a "discipleship of equals."

The faith life of Women-Church is brought to an expression made public through the celebration of feminist liturgy. There is a commonality among the various expressions of feminist liturgy, even while groups vary. Liturgy in its own self is to be rooted in the community. For communities of Women-Church, feminist and emancipatory liturgy is the act of celebration rooted in the community. Characterized as liberative and emancipatory, this form of liturgy may be eucharistic or non-eucharistic. Often times, Eucharist is celebrated within Women-Church circles. Breaking with the traditional rubric of eucharistic liturgy being celebrated by an "ordained" male clergy, is both a liberative and emancipatory move. Liturgy celebrated within Women-Church begins in the will of the community, placing into the heart and hands of its members the task of focusing the prayer of the group, and it is in their planning the liturgy through which the community enters into sacrament. If worship is truly praise, thanksgiving and transformation, then an integral piece of the function of liturgy is to elicit from the community how that can and will occur. Being drawn from the creativity of many, the liturgy can focus and fuse this impulse of the community into collective prayer and action. Hence, there is a shift from a hierarchy of ministries toward a coequality in which the community is not made whole without the gifts of all. The Constitution of the Sacred

Liturgy *(Sacrosanctum Concilium)* formulated and implemented at the Second Vatican Council says:

> The Church earnestly desires that all faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebration which is demanded by the very nature of liturgy, and to which the Christian people have a right and obligation by their baptism.[70]

I am moved to ask: How does active participation happen in this time in history? How are we, the people of God, the Body of Christ, bound to fulfill that full, conscious and active role in the dialogue between God and humanity? Lastly, how is it an active dialogue if it is written by someone else, with no input from the community and no deviation from the rubrics allowed? The same Council document continues to say:

> From the liturgy. . . grace is poured forth. . . and the sanctification of people and the glorification of God. . . are achieved with maximum effectiveness. Consequentially, the need for active participation so that believers will be open to engage in this dialogue and to cooperate in the goal of redemption, which corresponds to the goal of creation, becomes a major concern of this constitution.[71]

The call to worship does not come from the institution, but from the Spirit. Through and in the people of God, worship and liturgy is polished by practice. Having become deliberate in the understanding of why they gather, as well as self-reflective of how liturgical gathering affects its members' lives, Women-Church has intensified its

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[70]Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., "Vatican II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents," in *The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1980), cit.1:14, 7-8.
[71] Kilmartin, "Theology of the Sacraments," 124-25.

bonds, and therefore is able to take on the character of intentional community. As people grow in affirmation and education in the midst of crumbling authority structures, a greater need for intentional community is perceived. What in the past was believed should come from experts, must now come from people themselves. Those who gather in the company of equals have power to accomplish much. Subsidarity becomes both desirable and necessary. It has been the experience of women to understand strength as coming from shared experience.

I would like to focus on several specific elements that contribute to the creation of and the defining of feminist liturgy as developed with in the construct of Women-Church. These are common elements that I suggest would enhance any liturgy. These elements of feminist liturgy are: readings and music, body expression, setting/environment, symbols, color, artistic arrangement, the artistic side of participants, use of language and leadership. I would like to briefly look at each of these in light of how they create and emancipate liturgy for Women-Church.

1. *Readings and music*, first of all, need to be written in inclusive language; that is, they need to be free of sexist, classist and racist words for God/ess and for people.

2. *Body expression* is included through touch, movement and gesture. Participants need to be invited to form a circle, sway during a song, interlock arms. When blessing bread, washing hands, pouring wine, the use of dramatic gestures enhances and enables people to see them more clearly. Encouragement and invitation to embrace, hug, kiss, touch one another frees the group from being static with each other. The use of dance and choreographed movement to song and readings further affirms the beauty of the giftedness of being embodied people.

3. *Setting/environment* is very important to worship, as it is reflective of the message of the liturgical celebration. Circles are used most frequently in feminist liturgy, as a circle allows each person equal opportunity to contribute and participate. Leaders should be part of the circle. The elimination of platforms and leveling of leaders and participants which create a "hierarchical" setting is integral to feminist liturgy.

4. *Symbols* are key to feminist liberation, emancipatory liturgy; symbols are the visible carriers of the message of the liturgy. Water, fire, stones and other items that have a symbolic meaning for the participants should be used. Symbols can be useful in emphasizing a particular theme for the liturgy. Symbols should have a central place in the liturgy and need to engage the participants in and during the celebration.

5. *Color* and artistic arrangement enhance and create a prayerful environment.

6. *The artistic side* of participants is a constant in feminist liturgy. It is important to nurture and acknowledge the gifts and talents of those gathered to celebrate. Musical talents in the playing of instruments and vocal talents of participants should be encouraged and invited. Individuals may dance to accompany a reading or song. Dance is a wonderful and effective element that contributes to feminist liturgy. Dramatic readings and mime are also highly effective as a means of incorporating the gifts of those who gather to celebrate. Feminist liturgy brings to public expression the faith life of the people gathered.

7. *Language* is inclusive not only by being free of sexist, classist and racist connotations, but also by being inclusive culturally. Women of faith speak in many languages. The use of a variety of languages is common to Women-Church worship celebrations.

8. *Leadership* in feminist liturgy is most often shared and not centered on one person. Thus there is no one individual singled out as the "presider." Various individuals often time lead various components of the celebration by doing readings, saying prayers, blessings, etc.

Diann Neu, feminist theologian, liturgist and cofounder of WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual) recently proclaimed at a feminist eucharistic liturgy celebrated in September 2000 at Wellesley College, "Feminist liturgies keep alive the memory and imagination of the community of women believers and those children and men who identify with them." As Women-Church has continued to grow, the breadth and scope of membership has widened in some groups to welcome the participation of children and men.

The imagination that circles what is and then sees beyond to what can be is a frequent way in which God is present to those who are oppressed. I have found myself called to identify with the Women-Church movement from my personal experience of oppression and alienation in the Church. I have found that blessed imagination takes form in the life and liturgy of Women-Church. Creative imagination that is embodied in feminist liturgy is the future being activated and driven by the Spirit. It has been my experience in creating and participating in feminist liturgies that such an inclusive spirituality liberates human imagination. Liberation from the fear of being creative is redemptive, and it is through human creative activity that relationship with the Creator emerges. As an artist, I have found that the ability to create stems from the use and power to imagine. Feminist spirituality can speak to this development of an inclusive spirituality that liberates, for women and men, the power of the imagination.

Women-Church has long recognized the gifts and talents of its members. The use of these gifts and talents nurtures the spirituality and expression of this spirituality for the group. In recognizing individual gifts, using these creative abilities and being imaginative, Women-Church keeps alive the memory of the community of believers and those who identify with them. Imagination has power, and feminist liturgies empower those who celebrate them to create for change and social transformation.

It is imperative that Women-Church continue to be creative and imaginative. Feminist liturgies bring much to those who celebrate them and to institutional religious services. Feminist liturgies are generative. Should feminist liturgies become more inclusive, they would suffice this generativeness for men, social change and religious traditions. Feminist liturgies bring into being an alternative memory for those who celebrate them. In their place and in their time they affirm the fullness of equality and capability of those who gather. The spirit of imagination calls forth the prophetic stirrings that allow participants to know that incarnation is possible in the present time and culture. God's presence is revealed through imagination as it is and as it is beyond. Imagining what God's presence can be liberates those who are oppressed. The activation of creative imagination for Women-Church is driven by the Spirit and embodies feminist liturgy. Ruether says, "Only if some groups work intensely and exclusively on imagining an alternative culture in a way that cannot be controlled or limited by patriarchal culture. . . . does the possibility of a genuine transformational dialectic take place."[72] Women-Church and the feminist liturgies they celebrate will influence generations to come, they are life-giving and transformational. The future rests in the continued renaming of traditional issues and giving lifeless liturgical forms a life-giving Spirit.

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[72] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Woman-Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 62.

There is also a need for further acknowledgment in saying that men have been injured and harmed by the disorder of patriarchal culture. Futuristically, feminist liturgy as inclusive may be able to provide some disposition for ritual strategies that are inclusive of men's experiences. This I believe is possible, as women more and more pray freely, and do so fearless of condemnation or retribution for their liturgical practices. As women experience their growth in the spirit, exercise this prophetic spirit and feel free to create with the spirit, then I believe there will be a place for men to be welcomed into their spaces of prayer and celebration. Some communities of women have already moved to this inclusive realm. Most importantly, women need to be able to stand free, be fully recognized as being full participants in salvation's event and then, in time, companions may journey with them in how and where they worship.

I believe it is the hope of Women-Church that all (baptized?) humanity will have a place in the Church. Women-Church and feminist liturgy provide for some vision for the future worship of the people of God. Feminist liturgy moves beyond constraints of the Church. Small groups as communities of faith have sought new ways in seeing each as the image of God. The celebration of liturgies and rituals put this vision into being. Those who are seen as less than equal are included; there is wholeness for all people and all creation. Women-Church and feminist Christians must strive to uphold for the future the recognition of all persons as Spirit bearers and grace filled revelations of God. Joan Chittister says:

> I think a new sense of grace is coming into women. . . . But I think it's what happens to a person who comes face to face with the grace of God in life. I think you become capable of anything. And no system,

> no matter how sincere, can ever again convince you that your relationship to God must be mediated by a man, or that God doesn't want to deal directly with you. . . . Somehow you begin to know that what is going on inside of you is of God.[73]

I think it is the "what is going on inside is of God" that is pertinent to the future of Women-Church. Women's taking charge of their spiritual lives has begun to flow on to the Church. Change has begun. It began in the one woman inviting another and then another. It has begun with individuals who have nourished each other for the changing. Change is slow and change is small. Women-Church has had an impact because the women in these communities have had stamina. Sandra Schneiders comments:

> The work of feminist Catholic theologians, ministers, and parents toward this end (the full and final repudiation of patriarchy) is carried on in the firm hope that one can use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house and that from the debris of the house of ecclesiastical patriarchy we will be able to construct the home of equal discipleship within which the reign of God can be realized.[74]

In the picture there remains the hope that the institutional Church will change. Women-Church continues to be an agent of that potential change. Women-Church offers those who gather a safe place for prayer and worship. A place where the Spirit's invitation is heard with women's own ears. The continued creation and celebration of feminist liturgy is essential to the future of Women-Church. The impact will be how much we live what we celebrate. We have the tools. Let the dismantling continue!

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[73] Chittister, *Women Strength*, 176.
[74] Schneiders, "Effects of Women's Experience on Spirituality," 108.

EPILOGUE

"When We Leave this Place We Will Be Revived"

I would like to say that this chapter concludes this project. However, it takes on a new beginning in some ways and continues on for as long as I minister to the people of God. Even though the written word of this thesis is close to completion, the work of bringing these ideas, possibilities and realities into the lives of those for whom I have written this thesis is ongoing and continually changing.

I have attempted to describe attributes of Women-Church that are necessary for the future, a future that will continue to experience many changes. Women-Church can be most influential in the kinds of changes that may occur. I have sought to find answers in doing this project. I have not found all the answers. Women-Church does not have all the answers and I believe this to be good. If Women-Church were to have all the answers, that would only empower once again a few to give and hand down to the many the final answers.

I have learned through this study that Women-Church is marking a path, one of many paths, which many spiritual groups are also marking. God's spirit does not just settle in the hearts, soul and experience of just a few. God's Spirit swells and dwells in all that breathes and creates. There is not just one way, and there are many seekers. Various traditions have contributed images, prayers, emotions and ways of living as companions for the journey written about in this thesis.

The chapters of this thesis are but an attempt to live what we have celebrated and have yet to celebrate. No one knows exactly what is needed for the transformation of worldly or ecclesial systems. It is in the knowing that God exists and that transformative power exists in God that is a formative beginning. We stumble upon it and sometimes toward it in the praxis of life. Sometimes we are not even aware of our stumbling upon it, until we are surprised and amazed by what has come from small and ordinary efforts. Women-Church has already begun to move into its future from where it was two and a half decades ago. What the future of Women-Church will be depends on how it will trod its path. While the walking may not be any easy task, if it is walked with many, many women, men and children it may be made easier. Certainly, in the future, finding the grace to be Church while not being of the Church may be a risk not yet realized.

I always tend to imagine Women-Church as a large entity, but it is really very small. Being small is what allows it to flourish, grow and be Church. Being communities that are small enables the use of charisms. Smallness births empowerment, encourages mutuality and partnership, allows for forgiveness and moves towards justice. Being and remaining small is a gift to cherish and preserve for Women-Church in the present and in the future. To plan the future would betray the very nature of the Spirit that dwells and moves Women-Church. The Spirit guides and breathes through Women-Church. The Spirit will remain with Women-Church.

In commenting on what the future may hold for feminist spiritual groups, Sheila Durkin Dierks says:

> With the growth in awareness and articulation of our awesome power to be life-givers, -shapers, -preservers, we see our futures molded in

> the stories we tell. . . . The sufferings in our communities and in our world, the threat to life from violence and pollution give great urgency to the call to work for life. Women, feminist people, are embracing a life-with, rather than a power-over the world around us. We more and more identify with the pain of the world. We see ourselves as more like than different from those around us. It is doing away with dualities, reuniting mind and body, humans and earth that we see as key to the future.[75]

Women-Church is the work of creative and sacred imagination, as is the Church that will grow out and from it. All of creation, as I mentioned previously, is the work of sacred and creative imagination. The women I have encountered in my work for this project, the young female students I have taught, the women I have ministered with, and the feminist theologians who have educated me and formed me, all have witnessed to me this living sacred and creative imagination. They have challenged and inspired me to imagine. That is what I have set out to do in my ministry and in this thesis.

I have begun to imagine an inclusive spirituality, an alternative Christology and a non-kyriarchal Church. This imagining has been inspired by the long and tedious journey of women now and before who have built and continue to build "households" where sexism, classism, racism, and heterosexism are not welcome, but justice may flourish and take up residence.

I have learned that there will always be voices that have the need to be heard. In this learning I know I will continue to do the following. I will continue to grip my

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[75] Dierks, *WomanEucharist*, 285.

fingernails into church benches when I am frustrated and angered by the preaching of a homily that uses scripture to abuse the people of God. I will continue to express my discouragement when faithful people continue to be marginalized and disenfranchised by a Church they love. I will continue to walk out of Church portals with sisters and brothers who are not sure where to turn and in not knowing, choose to return week after week. I will continue to confront the systemic ills of a patriarchal and hierarchical Church that promotes clericalism, racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism within its walls.
I will continue to journey with them and I will continue to invite them to seek out that which Women-Church has offered to so many. In short, I will continue to creatively imagine what the reign of God can be and where it can be found. I have heard their voices and I have written but just a small part of a very large story. Perhaps it is in the staying that we may revive others. Or, perhaps for some it is in the leaving that we can be revived.

APPENDIX I

SAMPLES OF FEMINIST EMANCIPATORY PRAYERS AND LITURGY

This appendix includes several feminist liturgies/prayers. I have included them in this work to give examples of and expressions to the power of feminist liturgy. The liturgies and prayers that follow strive to incorporate the various elements of feminist liturgy as described in Chapter 4.

The following is a prayer I created based on the "Magnificat." It is an example of feminist prayer form in the reconstruction of its use of inclusive language. The "Magnificant" is a wonderful prayer proclamation of the transformation sought through the inspired nature of feminist emancipatory liturgy.

Luke 1:46 – 56.

Our Souls proclaim the greatness of God
and our spirits exult in God our savior;
because God has looked down on the lowly.
Yes, from this day forward all generations will call us blessed,
for God has done great things for us.
Holy is the Creator's name,
and God's mercy reaches from age to age for those who give their love.
God has shown us strength and has routed the proud of heart.
The mighty have been pulled down and the poor raised up.
The hungry have been fed and the rich now know need.

God has come to our help, we are mindful of God's mercy as shown to our ancestors, and the promise made to us all forever.
Amen.

The following segment is taken from the last lesson of a curriculum I wrote for a six-week adult education program, *Reconstructing the Devotional of the Stations of the Cross*, for Professor Joanna Dewey's course entitled "The Healing, Suffering and the Death of Christ in the New Testament" (Episcopal Divinity School, Spring 1998).

Participants in this program will create a Stations of the Cross liturgy to be celebrated in the parish on the Wednesday before the start of the Triduum on Holy Thursday. The course description as it was advertised to the parish is as follows:

> "We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection, through him we are saved and liberated."
>
> (Intro Rite: Evening of the Lord's Supper)

What are the elements, which guide us to and through the cross? What is it that calls us to a deeper experience of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus?

Come! Participate in a creative workshop. This course's framework is inclusive of the history, tradition and praxis of the devotional known as the "Stations of the Cross." We will look at this Lenten devotion at both the personal and communal levels, define and share experiences of suffering, healing and atonement, giving attention to multi-cultural and multi-theological attributes. Participate in constructing and creating a communal tapestry that combines the spiritual with the practical in the hope of raising the worship of this Lenten devotional to a new level of experience. At the end of this

course, participants will create a liturgical celebration of the Stations of the Cross that will be held in the church on Wednesday April 19, 2000. This celebration will be for the entire Catholic community of Lexington, as we journey into the celebration of the Paschal Triduum.

(From curriculum notes for preparing this lesson)

"I would very much encourage the use of strong symbols, and sensory provoking elements, i.e., incense, music, dry ice, etc., to create the worship environment. The use of creative imagination is integral to the creation of this feminist emancipatory liturgy. Those responsible for creating this liturgy are encouraged to probe deeply into the depths of their imaginations so that the liturgy itself will embody all who celebrate it. This is a liturgy promoting justice and this theme can be enhanced and strongly nourished by the use of creative imagination. It is possible to inhabit another world by means of symbols when these symbols are nurtured by the imagination. Symbols can do many things. They can point to a person's need to do something and be the avenue whereby people get in touch with their inner lives. Symbols can focus the common objectives of a group. Because symbols have an ambiguous quality, they can articulate a variety of relationships while bringing these relationships together through a central focus. Symbols can bring together the energies of a society, as well as the people of God.

"Therefore, the goal of this group is to reconstruct the 'age old' traditional devotional liturgy of the Stations of the Cross and create an example of a feminist liturgical celebration for the parish community. Those who participate in this liturgy should be invited and stirred into using their imagination in during this worship experience. Recovering the imagination in the liturgy frees those who worship from

oppression: restores balance to people and enhances their self-dignity, all very much representative of an 'ethic of care,' as we discussed in an earlier class."

The following is the closing prayer for the last class session for this course. Every class closes with a feminist liturgy/prayer service. This is an integral part of the course. I created and used feminist liturgies/prayers for this curriculum to introduce participants to the various elements and to experience feminist liturgy in order that they may integrate these components into the creation and construction of their liturgy on the Stations of the Cross. Some of this service is adapted from Ann M. Headlamp's *No Longer Strangers: A Resource for Women and Worship*, edited by Iben Gjerding and Katherine Kinnamon, Geneva, W.C.C. Publications, 1983, pp. 24-25.

Closing Prayer: A Litany of Women's Power

All: Spirit of Life, we remember today the women, named and unnamed, who throughout time have used the power and gifts you gave them to change the world. We call upon these foremothers to help us discover within ourselves your power and the ways to use it to bring about your Kingdom of justice and peace.

L. We remember SARAH who with Abraham answered God's call to forsake her homeland and put their faith in a covenant with God.

All: We pray for her power of faith.

L. We remember ESTHER and DEBORAH, who by acts of individual courage saved their nation.

All: We pray for their power of courage to act for the greater good.

L. We Remember MARY MAGDALENE, and the other women who followed Jesus who were not believed when they announced the resurrection.

All: We pray for their power of belief in the face of skepticism.

L. We remember PHOEBE, PRISCILLA, and the other women leaders of the early church.

All: We pray for their power to spread the Gospel and inspire congregations.

L. We remember the Abbesses of the Middle Ages who kept faith and knowledge alive.

All: We pray for their power of leadership.

L. We remember TERESA of AVILA and CATHERINE of SIENA who challenged the corruption of the church during the Renaissance.

All: We pray for their powers of intelligence and outspokenness. (Here may be added contemporary women and their contributions from various cultures).

L. We remember our own grandmothers and mothers whose lives shaped ours.

All: We pray for the special power they attempted to pass on to us.

L. We pray for the women who are victims of violence in their homes.

All: May they be granted the power to overcome fear and seek solutions.

L. We pray for those women who face a life of poverty and malnutrition.

All: May they be granted the power of hopefulness to work together for a better life.

L. We pray for the women today who are "firsts" in their fields.

All: May they be granted the power to persevere and open up new possibilities for all women.

L. We pray for our daughters and grand daughters.

All: May they be granted the power to seek that life which is uniquely theirs.

(Here may be added any women you would like to remember or for whom you may wish to pray).

All: We have celebrated the power of many women past and present. It is time now to celebrate ourselves. Within each of us is that same life and light and love. Within each of us lie the seeds of power and glory. Our bodies can touch with love; our hearts can heal; our minds can seek out faith and truth and justice. Spirit of life, be with us in our quest.

Amen.

The following liturgy is one I created and used for a retreat that I directed for a group of women in May of 1997 in Saco, Maine. The theme of the retreat was "Blessings and Woes." This was the closing service for the retreat. I include this as another example of feminist liturgy that is empowering, creative, inclusive and imaginative. The Water Ritual and Celtic Mythology have been adapted from feminist liturgies created by Diann Nue of WATER (Women's Alliance for Ethics, Theology and Ritual).

Call to Gather:

We are called to be sowers and reapers.
We are called to be persons of blessings and woes.
We are called to be persons capable of transformation.
We are called to be visionaries, to see blessing in woe.
We are called to be healers, to pay attention to wholeness.
Wholeness and healing.....the woes and proclaiming the blessings.
Within our faith communities.
We represent all women, men and children who seek and struggle to be community.
We yearn to share our skills and talents with those who seek to make a difference in the world.
We desire to cast our lot with those who believe that we can do more together than we can individually.
We stand in this place with blessings, certain that justice rolls down like water.
By being here, we bless this place.
Let us bless one another for the work to which we have been called.

Circle of Blessing

Let us create a circle of blessing. Say your name, add the words "I am (say your name) a person of blessing, a healer of woes," then give your right hand to the person on the right. The person on your right then speaks.

(Song) Song of Community by Carolyn McDade

Readings

Reader 1: Our souls proclaim the greatness of God.
We magnify the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit,

Sophia–Wisdom.
Our spirits rejoice in God our Liberator,
who has looked upon us with favor.
The time has come for us to claim our heritage.
Yes, from this day forward all generations will call us blessed.

Reader 2: For great things have been done through us.
And those who went before us.
Holy is our name.
We have shown mercy from age to age.
We have gathered our courage and steadfastness
And moved to heal the in-between and distance of
blessings and woe.
To heal those seeking blessedness and those broken by woe
with tenderness and care.
We have called forth truth.

Reader 3: Yes, we have been hungry and have filled each other with good things.
We have kept our promises and journeyed and struggled.
In the hope of our dreams.....
touching and healing.....
laughing and crying....
questioning and loving....
Yes, indeed by our living and our faithfulness,
by our attention to transforming woes into blessings.
All generations from this day forth will be blessed.

Blessing of Healers

Leader :

Filled with the sounds, the power,
the visions, the challenges,
and the commitments of our ministries.
Let us lay hands on one another and bless one another.

Touch the shoulders of the person on either side of you.
Speak aloud your name and together say,
"We are called to be healers of woe and ministers of blessings."

Reader 1: Spirit of blessings and healings,
time and again throughout history you call forth your ministers
from the community and send them to do works of justice;
to heal the broken-hearted,
to feed hungry souls,
to give drink to thirsty ones,
to free captives.
Come, Ruah, Healing Spirit,

regenerative force, bless us your healers.
To do your work of mending and making whole.
Let us respond with these words:
"Pour out your spirit upon us, Sophia–Wisdom."

All: "Pour out your spirit upon us, Sophia–Wisdom."

Reader 2:

We ask you to bless us,
your healers of woe and bringers of blessings,
who, in the cry of the people and in the word
of the community,
have been called healers.
We ask you to pour out your Spirit upon us,
that we may have the gifts of
seeing visions, dreaming dreams,
breaking bread, doing justice.
Let us respond with these words:
"Pour out your Spirit upon us, Sophia–Wisdom."

All: Pour out your Spirit upon us, Sophia–Wisdom.

Reader 3: Pour forth your Spirit, Sophia–Wisdom,
on your people with whom we minister.
Pour forth your Spirit on the Church,
that the whole people of God may benefit from our work.
Pour forth your Spirit on our families and friends,
that they may offer us loving care,
understanding and support.
Let us respond:
"Pour out your Spirit upon us, Sophia–Wisdom."

All: Pour out your Spirit upon us, Sophia–Wisdom.

Reader 4: When the bread is not enough,
when our hope is dim.
When our energies are frazzled,
when our vision is blurred.
Refresh us with your Spirit.
Let us respond:
"Pour out your Spirit upon us, Sophia–Wisdom."

All: Pour out your Spirit upon us, Sophia–Wisdom.

Water Ritual

In the center of our table is a bowl of water representing a sacred well. Holy wells through the ages have been believed to have healing powers. Water is healing and regenerative, refreshing, illuminating, and transformative force. It facilitated life. It is spoken of as the source, the healer, the transformer, the spring of ancient wisdom.

As we pass the water bowl, the sacred well, look into it and visualize the water's traits and its power. Visualize the power you receive from the waters in your life.

(pass the water bowl)

Blessing with Water

Touch the water with your hands,
then touch your eyes saying after me:
"Bless my eyes that I may see clearly the woes of others."

Touch your ears, saying:
"Bless my ears that I may listen to the words and sighs of those who seek liberation from the world's oppression."

Touch your lips, saying:
"Bless my mouth that I may speak words of encouragement, truthfulness and vision."

Touch your heart, saying:
"Bless my heart that I may feel with compassion."

Touch your hands, saying:
"Bless my hands that I may touch with grace."

Touch your feet, saying:
"Bless my feet that I may walk along a road which leads others to freedom. May I walk in the Way, and the light."

Touch your whole body, saying:
"Bless my whole body, that I may be filled with your Holy Spirit."

Sending Forth

In Celtic mythology, stones have healing qualities. They activate the power of holy wells. Take a stone from around the well to symbolize your power of healing woe and announcing blessings, and the powers of this community.

Blessed and filled with holy and healing power, let us exchange these healing stones with one another, remembering that the gift of healing is given by and for the community.

Let us send one another forth, exchanging the stones and saying: "We call you to heal woe and proclaim blessing."

APPENDIX II

WOMEN'S IMAGES OF GOD, SPIRITUALITY AND CHRIST

This project was created and conducted for my Christology course in the Fall of 1997 with the Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward. I devised this inventory to explore the images of God, spirituality and Christ that are held by women who are members of Women-Church. The responses gathered are those that were received from members of the local Women-Church who contributed to information for this thesis. Women responded anonymously and not all members chose to participate. The responses here are but a small sampling. The inventory asked for "spontaneous" responses rather than belabored ones. The responses are recorded here as they were written and submitted to me. I think that the responses are representative of the homogeneous makeup of the group, yet indicate some shift and movement away from the paradigms of tradition in the areas inquired about.

IMAGES OF GOD

1. What were some of the images of God in your childhood?

The old white grandfatherly man who sat on a throne surrounded by angels.

An elderly man, a judge in big robes.

A faceless being, someone watching over everything you did.

2. Do believe God can also be called "Goddess"? Why or why not?

Yes. (This was not always the case.)

God is neither male or female, qualities of masculine and feminine <u>are</u> God, since <u>we</u> are God's image.

Goddess designates gender and I feel that the word "God" is genderless, I prefer the word God over Goddess.

3. What images of God that you have encountered in your life have spoken to you?

God as friend, confidant, accessible.

Power, awe and beauty in creation, nature, animals, human beings.

Love, compassion of others.

A. Are there any images of God which leave you unsettled?

Images which present God as destructive.

Judgmental images.

God as harsh.

4. What images are expressive of what God is like for you?

I feel surrounded or encompassed by a "mantle" of peace, serenity.

More of a feeling than an image.

A presence.

The laughing Christ.

5. Have you ever encouraged your children, or younger people to create and explore new images of God? Why or why not?

Yes, every person has an imagination which needs to be used.

Some youth do not believe in God.

My own children each have different images of God, very individualistic.

I hope I helped them to create their own images.

We didn't often talk about images of God. Rather, I encouraged the children to pray to a loving and forgiving father.

6. If and when you pray, in what direction is God? (up, down, inside ,outside, does not apply, etc.) Where is God?

Varies, usually "out there."

Usually, "surrounding" me.

Usually, just present where ever I am.

Everywhere for me.

I think God is mostly inside, if I need to give a direction.

7. Do you believe God may be found in nonhuman images? Explain.

Definitely! The awe of Redwoods, the power of the sea.

Constancy of sunsets and sunrises.

The intricate beings in the insect world.

The colors, shadings and patterns in plant life.

Yes, God made all things, so the beauty of nature reminds me of God's presence.

8. Is it possible for you to pray without images? Is it possible?

Yes, Conversations with God—no particular image is needed.

Yes, often time pray in thoughts, no image comes to mind.

Yes, but images help me.

SPIRITUALITY

1.What phrases or words do you associate with the term "Spirituality"?

Connecting to God.

Connecting to my inner self.

Inner Spirit.

Breath.

A. When did the word "spirituality" first have meaning for you?

As an adult.

Perhaps as a teen, but I did not think of spirituality in the same way.

Gave serious thought to it when I began my Master's program in Pastoral Counseling.

2. What feelings or images do you associate with spirituality?

Inner communion with God.

Deep feeling of being touched interiorly.

Tranquility, passion.

Love and compassion.

3. Did you ever have an experience in your childhood which you would consider as contributing to your spirituality?

In teen years.

Probably, but a single one does not comes to mind.

No.

Not anything outstanding or life changing.

4. Did you ever have an experience in your teenage years which you consider as contributing to your spirituality?

Yes, but I did not process this as "spirituality."

Others may have been apart of this experience but not connected to it.

No experiences.

5. During the past week have you had an experience which you would consider as contributing to your spirituality?

Yes. Working with an individual in the parish.

Yes. A conflict was resolved in my home.

Yes. I am meeting with a group to talk about the aging process and the meaning/ spirituality of it.

6. If you could choose one woman, (real or fictitious) who influenced your spirituality, who would it be?

My maternal grandmother.

My grandmother.

A dear woman friend.

My mother.

A mentor in one of my pastoral counseling classes and learning experiences.

Dr. Jane Vicira, a Commander in the U.S. navy.

The Blessed Mother.

Sister Pauline (Holy Cross Sisters)

7. What aspect of your spirituality would you want to hand over to the next generation of young women?

Freedom to live their spirituality out.

The importance of being able to express your spirituality.

To feel individually and in their own ways their own sense of God and self.

Be open to the Spirit.

Compassion, with themselves and with others.

8. Complete the following statement: For me, spirituality is…..

The intrinsic essence which brings a person closer to God.

Being open to the Spirit.

A sense of the sacred internalized.

My life and my breath.

My innermost being, my journey and my passion.

CHRISTOLOGY

1. Are you a Christian? If you are not have you ever been?

Yes. (Six "yes" responses)

2. How have you become aware of Jesus/Christ?

Through my parents.

Reading, religious education classes.

Teacher in high school.

Catholic School education.

Positive models of religious Sisters I had in school.

3. In your experience and or understanding of Jesus/Christ, name those resources which have had an influence on you. These may be negative or positive.

My father, positive model.

The general atmosphere in which I grew up.

My family and friends.

Life and drawing on my faith.

4. Do you have a relationship with Jesus/Christ at this time? Please describe.

Yes, I try to live the gospel in my day-to-day life.

I do have a relationship with Jesus, particularly in trying to be a disciple through my Baptism.

I share an ongoing relationship at this time, it is not always steadfast.

In living out my Christian vocation.

5. Are Jesus and Christ the same for you?

Yes. If not Jesus, who is the Christ?

Jesus and Christ are the same to me.

(Question 5 responses, continued.)

Yes, they are the same.

I have never thought of them as being separate.

6. Who is Jesus/Christ for you? Is he God?

Yes and no. Sometimes I relate to the humanity of Jesus, other times the divine, kind of dualistic, isn't it?

Usually when I pray to or think about God, it is not Jesus I am thinking of.

Yes, for me, Jesus/Christ is God.

Jesus reveals God to me…not sure if they are one and the same?

7. What role or part does Jesus/Christ have in your worship?

Large part, reason I worship.

He is the role model for my life; I apply his scriptures to how I live my life.

The core of my worship is Jesus/Christ.

I worship because of my belief in Jesus.

8. Is Jesus/Christ an important part of your daily existence?

Absolutely.

Yes, he is.

I could not breath without the knowledge that he/she is with me.

I feel his love and care for me daily.

9. Do believe that Jesus/Christ is both human and divine?

Yes (6 same responses)

Sometimes I do, sometimes I'm not sure, but I don't worry about it.

10. What attributes of Jesus/Christ rest best with you? Liberation, atonement, death, resurrection, blood, body, justice, healing? Explain.

Liberation and justice, Jesus advocated justice.

Resurrection, healing, justice, he promoted healing of all sorts.

Resurrection, I believe in life after death as he promised.

Resurrection, liberation, healing, justice, these are very positive attributes.

Forgiveness is important to my perception of Jesus, rather than atonement.

11. How would you explain Jesus/Christ to someone who had never heard of him?

In a nutshell, I hope by my example in life would be an explanation.

I would describe him as a very dear friend, a very close relationship, everyone can relate to that.

Tell them he is the Son of God, who taught, preached, healed and showed us a way to live life.

He is a model for how we should treat each other.

An example of complete goodness.

Is a living promise of life even after earthly life.

12. What relationship does Jesus/Christ have to the earth? Universe?

Never thought about it....interesting.

I usually think of God in relationship to creation, universe, and earth.

He is very much related to creation, he experienced creation much like the rest of us.

All involved in creation, had great reverence for creation.

13. Is Jesus/Christ the same or different for women and men? Explain.

The same because we are equal, his relationship should be the same for both.

I have no idea, never though that it could be different.

(Question 13 responses, continued)

I imagine men relate better to him because they share their maleness in common.

I think women relate to different aspects of Jesus than do men.

14. Is Jesus/Christ the same or different for Caucasian women and Asian, Latina, African, African / American women?

I think so.

I don't know.

Has to be the same, because we are equal in his eyes

The same because we are all women.

Really don't know, but would like to find out.

15. Is Jesus/Christ the same or different for First World women and Second and Third World women?

I doubt it. It's very easy to relate to Jesus if you are not impoverished.

Think sometimes the hardships in life, homelessness, struggling to feed children allow you to know him better.

If disease, death and hunger are your daily companions, you know him differently.

He is the same for all humans, because we are all equal.

I think our experiences in life reveal him differently to each of us.

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